



A LONG WALK TO WIMBLEDON

H. R. F. KEATING

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Part One

When the telephone started to ring Mark could not think for some time what it was. The instrument had long been lost to sight behind an emergency stack of food cans, and nor was the sound the familiar unfamiliar burr-burr of old. It was instead an almost continuous trickle of ringing which, when at last he had realised what was happening and had begun to lift away the cans, mostly of a brand of nauseously soapy carrots, he saw as being made by some sort of cranked handset.

No doubt the call – if it was a call and not just some accident- was intended for some other house. But old habit had stirred to life like the rangy body of a sleeping bear at the first pricklings of spring and he picked up the softly dust-covered receiver.

‘Hello? Hello? Hello?’

At once he recognised the sharp tinny voice, and a whole network of mental responses he had long believed dead sprang up again. It was Mrs Brillling, Jasmine’s mother. As it had so often been in the long-ago. Was she phoning all the way from Wimbledon to Highgate?

‘Yes?’ he said, almost choking with caution.

‘Mark? Is that you, Mark? Heaven knows the trouble I’ve had getting through to you.’

New atrophied limbs pins-and-neededled. He was being put in the wrong, as he had always been before.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ he said. ‘What do you want?’

‘Mark, it’s Jasmine. She’s dying, Mark. She wants to see you.’

He did not answer.

Jasmine. What if she were dying? She belonged to another era. When there had been husbands and wives and ex-wives. Giving in marriage and obtaining divorces. Before. When there had been time and energy enough for such luxuries as forgiving. This would all have meant something then.

Yet a behaviour-groove from those days had kept his ear to the receiver.

‘Mark, she’s your wife, whatever happened. She’s dying, Mark. Tommy says so. You remember Tommy, the manager from the shop? He was always a marvel at diagnosing. What he didn’t know about natural remedies wasn’t worth knowing, Mark. And he says she’s dying.’

He remembered the manager of Mrs Brilling’s shop, Herb and Heather, over at Kingston upon Thames. A pretty odious creep.

He continued to keep silent. Unable to deal in any way with the new old question that was being thrust at him.

‘Mark? Mark?’

Yes. I’m here.’

‘Mark, I tried to talk her out of it. I’ll be quite frank with you, Mark. I don’t want you here. If only because I can’t see how I’m going to feed you.’

That little tin-hammer voice.

‘Mark, she wants to put herself in order.’

Rage burst out of him now, weakly lashing at target and air.

'Put herself in order? Put herself in order? Why didn't she put herself in some sort of order when we were married? Why didn't she try to live some kind of decent life? Why the drink, Mama? Why the men? Why all that money for joints, day in day out? We parted, you know, over all that. It was finished between us. Finished for ever. All those absurd clothes, those holidays, that procession of ridiculous jobs.'

'Mark, you've got to come. She's asking for you.'

'But how can I get all the way over to Wimbledon? Right across London? How?'

It was succumbing, of course. Why was he doing it? Just because that rubber-ball self-confidence had so often before bounced him into giving way? No. Surely it was not altogether that.

Now it was Mrs Brillington who was staying silent. Waiting.

'It's God knows how many miles,' he burst out again. 'There aren't buses any more, you know, and the Tubes aren't exactly running.'

He despised the cheap sarcasm before it was half-way out.

'Well, haven't you got a bicycle? It isn't really so far. You used to do it in not much over the hour in the car, before the traffic got so bad.'

'I haven't got a bicycle.'

'Oh, that's just like you. Other people have them. Everyone round here has. Jasmine had one till she got too tired to ride it. I suppose you let yours get taken, the way everything's taken these days.'

'I never needed a bicycle, Mama.'

'Well, if you haven't got one, you'll have to walk, won't you? I only hope you're in time. Tommy's made up some special stuff for her. And you should have seen all the things I had to give him in exchange. He says it will keep her going for the next forty-eight hours. The next forty-eight hours whatever happens. What time is it?'

He bent low and squinted through the one pane of clear glass left in the polythene-flapping window. The sky was lighter than it had been for some days, with a hint of pale wintry sun.

‘It must be just after mid-day.’

‘Well then, if you set off at once you should be in plenty of time.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. I expect I’ll be with you some time tonight then.’

He had agreed. He should have said brutally that he had no intention of making the journey. That he had long ago ceased to owe Jasmine anything. But he had agreed. Why?

It was because she was dying. It came to him clearly now. Dying Jasmine had a claim on him that the living spiralling-away estranged Jasmine had altogether forfeited.

However far it was, whatever the difficulties, he would go.

‘Now listen, Mark. She says you’ve still got a bottle of her Pernod. You remember how she loved Pernod? She says she was just opening a bottle when you made that last ridiculous – When she left. She says you won’t have got rid of it. You never threw things away. That was one of the – Well, never mind that now. Mark, bring that bottle for her. Bring it. God knows, there’s nothing else left to comfort her.’

He slammed the receiver down. Absurd ritualistic gesture from the gesture days.

He supposed it must have been a full two hours from the time he had had the phone call till he had been ready to set out. He had even at first felt too disturbed – his heart was beating perceptibly faster – to be able to get to grips with any preparations. Yet the call, for all that it had seemed extraordinary in the long long silence that had seeped down everywhere, had not really been such an altogether unlikely thing. He knew quite well that long ago the telephone

exchanges had been taken over by the Armed Police, and he had heard too that if you had some gold or some cannabis leaves or anything else you might otherwise have bartered you could get one of the men there to try putting through a call for you. Most lines were still in place and quite often they could be made to work.

And, when he had felt capable of getting down to leaving, there had turned out to be a lot to do.

First he had taken such precautions as he could against intruders. It was hardly likely anyone would want to take over the house – places to live round about had been going by the dozen ever since the Flight – but there were things worth looting, if only those cans of soapy carrots, a past daily payment from one of his pupils. So he had heaved the refrigerator from the kitchen where it had stood uselessly for so long up on to the table in the front room to block that one window not sheeted over with corrugated iron.

He had next heated up and carefully eaten all the remaining vegetables in his stew-pot. Then there had been the fire to put out, acutely galling when so much of his time was spent keeping alive its glim of heat, and there had been his dangling length of fuse to squash into blackness.

How would he light it again when he got back? Perhaps he would find someone who had a match to barter.

Next he had had to collect together everything he might need for the journey. He had remembered that there ought to be a London Guide somewhere in the house, well worth having if only half the rumours he had heard were true. Those rumours the parents round about would often send their children in lieu of more tangible payment for the reading and arithmetic he taught them. But search through the chill blacked-out rooms as he might all he could find was an old bus map, which meant that almost certainly he would have to stick to the main roads. He must have used the Guide for fire-lighting at some time, though he could not

recall doing so. But that was scarcely surprising when there had been so many mind-numbing marrow-cold endless winter days, in one winter or another.

Stuffing away a change of socks and some spare handkerchiefs, he had wished he had warmer clothes and better shoes. He had mended his only surviving pair of brogues towards the end of the summer when it had been still possible to go barefoot, but the crude soles he had fashioned out of rubber from the tyre of an abandoned car needed frequent and painful re-sewing to keep them from flapping. And he was already wearing all his remaining clothes indoors except his long double-sided burberry, saved as a last resource for when it got really cold. Not that it had not been chill enough these past few days. But it still must be only mid-November and there was bound to be worse to come.

The bottle of Pernod – yes, he had known just where to find it he stowed in one of the burberry's deep pockets and into the other he put an untouched loaf he had by a happy chance cooked that morning, still adhering to the length of stick on which he had patiently twirled it over the sullen smoke of his fire. He had filled, too, his plastic flask with long-boiled water. Even if he got stuck somewhere during the night he should have enough for the journey. Besides there was nothing else really to take, only some of his dried beans, hard enough to cook at the best of times, and vegetables still in the ground at the back. Or a can of the soapy carrots, those ostentatious payments.

At last there had been no more to do, and, knowing he was being ridiculous, he had attempted to smarten himself up a bit before facing the world, washing in water that would probably have dried to nothing before he got back and putting his fingers comb-wise through beard and hair. Finally he had shrugged on the burberry, mackintosh side

inwards since there was no sign of rain for once, and had slung the water flask over his shoulder.

Then he stepped out into what had been the front garden, long a tangle of over-grown lilacs and self-seeded sycamore saplings, of drifts of run-wild Michaelmas daisies, thistles and rampant interlacing creepers, not worth trying to cultivate when anything it grew could be so easily stolen.

It was as cold out-of-doors as he had feared, with a gusting wind from almost due east. But the sun was shining – judging from its height there must be not much more than two hours of daylight left – although it had ceased to have any real warmth in it. Reasonable enough weather.

He pulled the front door hard closed behind him. The lock clicked home with a dull snick.

In the street he turned and made his way towards Archway Road. It had been a long time, months and months, since he had been as far from the house as the old shop-lined high street, the A1, the Great North Road, which would take him on the first stretch of his long walk south. It lay now at the very edge of their ‘village’ or ‘area’ or ‘community’ – the half-dozen residential streets looking inwards to themselves for safety and comfort had never acquired a name – and he felt an apprehensive inward tightening as he approached.

But the wide road lay empty, its broad pavements scattered with grainy dust and intersected by broken lines of dark green tussocky grass, its shops that once would have been bright and lit and busy on a November’s afternoon boarded up, broken and defaced. Not a bicycle. Not even the faintest sound of any motor vehicle, though he had seen them here before, their drivers people who somehow had access to the Army’s supplies of petrol or the Armed Police’s or who were using big bulging gas-bags attached to their vehicles’ roofs.

He stepped out into the pot-holed roadway and looked up to the crest of the hill above, beyond the old Highgate Underground station. Carts from the comparative safety of the country, with food or such items as crude hand-made electric cells, had come there when they had had enough to barter. But there was nothing to be seen there now, only behind the wreck of a beer-tanker that had been held up and pillaged years before the big faded sign of a little hut-like shop still proclaiming 'Tempus Fugit - Antiques'.

He turned and took a long survey of the route ahead.

Fears which he had been holding back ever since he had known he was going to make the journey right across London to that little pebble-dashed house in South Wimbledon, where it seemed the once so reckless, so seeking Jasmine had finally come to rest, now abruptly broke through the sand-barrier he had piled up against them.

That huge rusty beer-tanker. He had not actually seen it being ambushed but he had heard what had happened soon enough. It had been back in the days when a semblance of metropolitan life had still existed despite blatant lawlessness, and one of the big gangs of predators roaming everywhere except the very centre of the city then had swarmed across the through-way pushing a broken-down mini-bus in front of them as the tanker had thundered down the hill. The driver and his guard had not had the ruthlessness to swerve round the obstacle and into the gang and they had paid for that by being hauled from their cab and battered insensible in spite of the shots the guard had fired. And then the gang - there had been more than thirty of them - had got roaring drunk on the contents of the long tank and had stayed that way till it was drained dry. Black damage had been done every day of that monster drunk. Women had been raped, men wantonly beaten up, houses set on fire. And, ever since, the tanker

wreck had stayed there, slowly rusting, a stark reminder, while all around the chaos that had seemed there and then to have reached a peak had risen up to the same level.

If the time when there had been tankers loaded with beer speeding from the breweries had long gone, there were, according to the rumours he was brought, plenty of places still where crude liquor was manufactured and round which its aggressive dependants would range. The stuff was called arrack. Arrack for some reason.

He looked away to where above the old rail line cut into the side of the hill it was possible to see for miles over the vast bowl of London. Thickly massed trees, the outliers of Highgate Wood, were dark and sombrely green in the thickening light and beyond them the distant buildings down below looked from here for the most part just as they had done when the city was flourishing.

The pale sun showed up whitish patches here and there, the sides of concrete blocks.

It was not the actual area he would have to go through. His route would lie further west. But it ought to be much the same, and it did not appear to be from this high vantage point at all menacing. The scene breathed even a spirit of tranquillity, with the wood in the foreground giving it something of a rural air. But all the hearsay accounts brought by payment-dodging pupils could not be total imagination. There would be dangers in the bowl of the city.

The looting bands that had marched the streets even before the final breakdown would not have dispersed. And no doubt any lone walker would be for them so much appetising prey.

One of the children, the son of the fussy fat little former owner of a car showroom, had come one morning with a story of fifteen bodies strung up from fifteen consecutive lamp standards not far away. That had been supposed to be the work of a gang. A piece of wild brutality. It could be

true. At the time he had convinced himself that the deaths, if they had happened, were only a bizarre manifestation of the suicide outbreak then at its height. But it might not have been that.

Certainly the Armed Police had long ago lost the ability to keep order, even if they had had it when they had been formed. And, if other tales he had heard were true, they themselves were often as much to be feared as counted on.

Yes, there were bound to be bad parts down there, between him and Wimbledon.

Between him and Jasmine.

He forced himself to look once more at the reason for his journey, little though he wanted to have to think again of Jasmine, to put his feelings towards her into flux once more. He felt that was asking too much of his long-deadened emotions. But he must have his object in setting out simple and plain before him, without any wrappings of sentiment, or any sour clinging streaks of rancour, if he was not to turn back even as soon as this.

And, once he had brought his mind to it, his object was clear. Whatever his feelings about Jasmine had been once, whatever the life of escalating wildness she had led had done to him all that long time ago, one fact was certain now. She was dying and she wanted to see him. Whatever else had ceased to count, death still survived.

‘Wife, wife, bane of my life.’

He started at the sound of his own voice. How long was it since he had last murmured half-aloud that absurd incantation?

Without realising what he was doing he found he had crossed back to the pavement and was beginning to walk downhill. Towards Wimbledon.

The wind came in chilling gusts on his left side, whipping the bottom of his coat hard against his legs. A cloud obscured the pale sun and at once it seemed a little dark.

What time would it be? Heavens, how long it had been since he had worried about one or two hours more or less. But it might be 3 p.m. now, or getting on for that. And if Jasmine really had only forty-eight ... No, forty-five or forty-six hours left now he must not linger.

His stamping feet gritted out on the pavement dust and when a stride chanced to fall on a grass ridge he could feel the bump through the thinness of the sole of his shoe and the layer of tyre rubber.

The boards nailed across the shop windows had been torn away here and there, doubtless to use as fuel. With others, past storms had loosened corrugated sheets leaving awkwardly-shaped black holes. What if from one of these a beast-man should suddenly leap?

He told himself, almost aloud, not to be fanciful.

On the opposite side now there was a terrace of tall houses with longish gardens in front of them. Willowherb had struck particularly here and the whole stretch of rubbish-strewn ground was spiky with its once purple spears, now withered and brown.

In the roadway at the far end of the terrace an articulated container-lorry had at some time been tipped on to its side. There was no telling how. Its twelve huge tyres had been slashed at for their rubber, useful in a dozen different ways, and its rear had obviously been forced open, although it was still possible to read on it the words 'Europa Spare Parts - Munich-Dover'.

Parts for cars that were all too spare themselves, hauled at much expense half-way across the Continent in some extraordinary complication of economics. How distant it seemed now. Angels on a pin's point.

He passed the wreck and slogged on.

Then he heard, the first distinct sound that had come to his ears above the random distant clattering of galvanised sheets and the brisk rustle of dry leaves and rubbish in the

wind, a faint mechanical throbbing. A generator, somewhere up on the slope of the hill to his right. It would be coming, he calculated, from the next small clump of habitation south of their own, perhaps half a mile away, people with whom they had had no contact. Evidently a community, though, with more fuel than they had. It had been a long time since they had done more than pump water for half an hour a day.

The sound grew steadily louder as he walked.

Then, just as he was about to reach a turning off to the right - he had forgotten what it was called, but the street name-plate was still there, thickly grimed but legible, 'Causton Road' - suddenly from underneath, as it were, the now heavy throb of the generator a new mechanical sound came through. The noise of a motor vehicle, clacking and badly maintained, approaching from the turning.

It was a sound out of the ordinary enough to have made anyone stop and look round them warily. But, coming at him so unexpectedly, it froze him where he was, just at the corner.

Poking his head round, he saw coming down weavingly towards him an ancient dusty green truck with, standing up in its back and leaning on the top of the cab, three swaying arms-linked figures. And at once he knew, without immediately being able to account for what it was exactly about them that told him, that these were Happies.

Happies - yes, it was partly the length of their hair, though few nowadays managed to keep theirs cut, and it was partly a glimpse of bright shirts that had given it to him - these were Happies, as people called them, some of the ones who for years had contrived to live lives of idleness, doing little but growing enough cannabis to provide a constant supply of joints. They had been named presumably from the hippies of the sixties and seventies, and certainly before life had closed down, in the last days

before the Second Riots, they were often to be seen wandering in groups or lolling outside one of the houses they had taken over. How they got food to eat, or whether they ever needed much, he had never known. Happies.

And now, mysteriously, here was a bunch of them travelling. In the cab of the truck, he could see now there were three more – hard to tell male from female – and each of them, yes, was smoking a fat brownish cigar-cigarette, a joint.

The truck, not going all that fast and making as it got near a tremendous racket, drifted from one edge of the narrow road to the other. The driver, one indolent hand on the wheel, hardly seemed to be looking where he was going at all.

They might well mount the pavement. He backed hard into the blowsy hedge of the corner house behind him.

And, as at last the truck approached the main road, it did seem to be heading straight at him. Clammy sweat at once came up all over his body. But the kerb saved him. Its edge was enough to deflect the loosely-held driving wheel, and with a creaking lurch, the battered dust-dimmed vehicle went back to the centre of the road, crossed the width of the highway and succeeded in getting into the turning opposite.

A sudden shout of laughter from its occupants rose up.

He stood, heart thumping crazily, gazing at the still meandering vehicle, as it receded clatteringly into the distance. In the back there had been another six or seven Happies, most dressed despite the cold in no more than jeans and bright-coloured shirts. Two of them, closely entwined, had been sitting up on one of the vehicle's thin metal sides, looking as if a much slighter jar than the one they had had at the kerb would have sent them toppling off.

But they had contrived to stay up. It sent a rush of pure fury through his head. What irresponsibility. They could

quite easily have been killed. Or the truck might, with just as little reason, have been going fast enough to have ridden up on to the pavement and carelessly brushed him himself under its wheels.

Then, as his heartbeats quietened, there floated into his nostrils the sweet odour he recognised so well from his days with Jasmine, the smell of lazily smoked joints.

He blew out furiously.

Part Two

For five minutes or more Mark stood at the corner of Causton Road, just where he had been, unable to move. The wind tugged from time to time at his old burberry and rattled the dry leaves of the bulging overgrown hedge at his back. Away on the far side of Archway Road the sound of the Happies' clattering truck died slowly away. His heartbeats settled at last into their usual rhythm.

Most of the Happies, he thought, would not even have seen him. And those that had would, in their cannabis dream-world, already have forgotten his existence. Yet he knew with a dead certainty that they threatened him.

It was not that he thought of them in any way as turning round, coming back and this time succeeding in mowing him down. It was what that swaying meandering dust-thick vehicle and its gay-shirted lolling occupants stood for that was menacing. That they would have laughed if instead of lurching at the kerb their crazy truck had mounted the pavement and swept him under its wheels. That they would have laughed and have as quickly forgotten.

He had been thinking before as he had slogged down the hill grim enough thoughts about the possible dangers ahead during the rest of this fading day and however much of the night he would need to get to Wimbledon. Notions of being chased by packs of dangerous drunks, of being leapt at

from some dark hole, even of the zing of a rifle bullet close to his head, had been marching with nailed boots through his mind. He had not brought himself fully to face them, but he had at least been aware of them. But, though he had been apprehensive enough, he had retained a just-allowed hope that luck would get him through.

The sight of that swaying swerving truck and the rich come-and-gone marijuana whiff it had left behind had put an end to that. It had unnerved him as if the very strings of his muscles had been slitheringly withdrawn from his body.

No, luck was not a friend. It was the worst enemy.

Now he knew with conviction that what lay ahead for him beyond any conjuring away was uncertainty. The territory he had pledged himself to make his way through was not simply a dangerous world. The journey facing him was not just a long walk where he would have to keep constantly alert, but which if he managed so much he might reasonably hope to complete with no more than some bad scares. No, ahead, he knew now, lay anything.

His world was at the mercy of the unmotivated.

Perhaps it had really been so for years. Perhaps that was what gradually, over as much as a century even, had been creeping up from beneath into the secure organised society which he had been brought up to believe he was living in and was entitled to live in his whole life long. The unmotivated.

Yes, he would still have to be as alert as he had expected to be for prowling gangs and vicious individuals. But besides these there would be dangers that sprang up out of nothing, that threatened without malice, that just happened. And which in happening could all too easily be the end of him.

To go back home after all?

To turn now this instant and get back up the hill, run until he got again to the familiar turning taking him into the

small area of relative safety he had known so long? The nightmare could be over in little more than ten minutes.

And Jasmine's mother could just wait to find out he was not going to respond to her plea. But would she then try to get through to him again? Well, if she did, couldn't he just talk to Jasmine that way?

But, no. Exchanging words over the tinny link of a long hither-and-thither route of telephone cables was not what Mrs Brillling had been asking of him in Jasmine's name. Jasmine wanted to see him, to look him in the face, to clasp his hands. And she had the right to ask that, however far apart they had been at the end. She had the right of the dying, all the stronger for the enmity there had been between them in life.

Wife, wife, bane of my life.

With a jerk, almost as if he had been woken by the sudden clangour of an alarm-clock – how long, how very long, it had been since time had mattered – he started forward and crossed over Causton Road. He must get on. The walk to Wimbledon should be completed well within his limit, but if there were dangers which he could not even anticipate lying there in wait between him and that little pebbledashed house where Jasmine lay, then he must get on as fast as he could while the way ahead looked clear.

And now there was not the least sign of life that he could see. An empty silence with only the noises caused by the gusting wind breaking the stillness, the sharp flap of polythene in some window, the tossing of the burstingly overgrown hedges that sometimes forced him to the very edge of the pavement.

He made progress.

Cromwell Avenue off to the right came into view, and, shuttered and abandoned, the little post office that had been there as long as he could remember. All that system of letters. First class and second. Postcards, letter-packets,

parcels, the range of postage stamps and the designs that time after time had been dreamt up for them. And Christmas cards, the rigmarole of them all, and the tiny threads of real communication.

No, nothing in sight down the turning for as far as he could see.

The faint remaining yellow trace of a 'no parking' line by the gutter as he stepped up at the kerb on the far side.

And onwards, swinging step after swinging step, the water-flask tap-tap-tapping softly and regularly on his hip. And the irregular rhythm of the wind as it rose and fell, the grit on the pavement whirling up in miniature tornadoes and then falling again.

Not long now and he would reach the house where once the family had earned its increasingly good livelihood. The 'Winchester School of English'. Typical of Dad, the opportunist pounce that had seized on that resounding name from Winchester Road crossing Archway Road just a few doors away. And how it had paid off. All the foreigners who had cheerfully forked out for 'English for Everyday', 'Cultural English', 'Commercial English'.

He saw, when he came in sight of the tall old house, that it was not at all in good shape. The black paneless windows were open to the weather and a big sprawling patch of plaster had fallen away from the wall leaving the dull yellow inner brick exposed.

No, he should not have acquiesced in it all, whatever loyalty he might have owed to Dad, however good the income that antfrantic, ultimately pointless scramble had brought them. But then, he had acquiesced in too many things, acquiesced only feeling uncomfortably that he should not.

He turned sharply away and plunged on down the long slope of the hill.

Jasmine, when she had come to work as a secretary for them. A temp, that was what they had been called, the great flock of itinerant typists encouraged never to keep a job for long so that their comings and goings could be developed into lucrative businesses. But Jasmine had tried so many other things, both before and after they had married. There was that place not far ahead now, just off from the Archway junction, the manicure parlour, though she had known precious little about manicure – perhaps there was little to know – Cats Claws as it had been called, Cats Claws at Alfredo's. Alfredo, the swanky hairdresser, who might or might not have been her lover. And the money the mere decoration of that place had cost, the false ceilings, the light fittings in the latest fashionable extravagant style, the heavy curtaining. And the whole venture had lasted less than two years.

Wife, wife, bane of my life.

But, swinging into view now, spanning the wide sweep of the road there was Archway Bridge, carrying Hornsea Lane high above the southwards-leading traffic artery.

He felt a lifting of the spirits, a sudden scorning of the fears that had been running rat-like through his mind. He had always, as long as he had known it, enjoyed, even loved, the sight of the great bridge. The massive certainty of those huge girders – the date cast in the metal, 1897, was still easy to see though the once cheerful blue paint had faded to nothing – had filled him despite their weightiness with the notion of flying, flying free. The triumph of strength. And the big smooth concrete slabs they had put underneath when the roadway had been widened to take the extra pulsings of traffic had done nothing to spoil the massive structure. The contrast in technologies, concrete and ironwork, even enhanced the pleasure.

Suddenly an idea came.

Climb up to it. Climb up as he had so often done as a boy. But climb up now so as to see ahead. Search for the dangers. Plan counter measures.

Or search at least for the known dangers.

He thrust this last qualm aside and walked on more rapidly. Tile Kiln Lane, off to the right, he remembered. A narrow side turning that wound stiffly up to the level of the road above.

He found it and set off along it, feeling at once the pull on leg muscles unused to climbing.

Tile Kiln Lane. The times he had pointed the name out to parties of his father's students on Saturday afternoon 'London Walks' (One guinea extra). A little piece of living history, he used to say. Well, it had seemed to be so in the days when history had looked like one long continuous skein. Before the shears had cut.

'A sleep and a forgetting.'

He had muttered the incantation aloud.

With a rim of sweat at his hairline and breathing stertorously - dull diet and only the occasional exercise of keeping his vegetable plot going had made him pasty and short-winded - he got up at last to the bridge approach, and almost before he was on to the bridge itself he saw that the climb was not going to have been worthwhile. Already in the short time he had been out the day had closed in and a grey mistiness had reduced the view to no more than half what it had been when he had looked over Highgate Woods to the area of the city lying to the east.

Going up close to the metal slatting of the bridge railing now, he could make out much less. Not a lot more than the tower blocks rising out of the chill dimness, oddly beautiful for all that they were mostly no doubt the fashion-conscious slabs of the property developers and municipal architects of the sixties and seventies, those needles dug into the body politic which had sent a gathering fever through the blood

to break out in the hectic swirl of the First Riots. The televised Riots, you might have called them, he thought. He remembered once they had shown the body of a man, or of a woman, that had been not just trodden to death but trodden into a sort of straw mat, meaningless unless you had heard the pulsating voice of the reporter telling you what it was.

He rested his forehead for a moment on the cold of the railing in front of him.

Well, at least he had better check the immediate dangers there might be when he made his way down again to Archway Road.

He walked along the rest of the bridge, keeping his eyes fixed on the roofs of the houses down below gapped with dark holes where slates or tiles had slid out of place. One house had no roof at all, just a pattern of fire-blackened joists with rising through them a small tree, still green. But nowhere did he see a sign of life, not even a questing dog.

It should mean he was safe for a little. Perhaps as far as the big intersection at Archway Underground station.

He took a last look along towards that in the misty distance. The wide road under him led straight down to the intersection, where, his bus map had told him, he would have to fork right going away from the A1 which led down into Holloway Road and the City and taking instead – what was it? – yes, Junction Road, turning before long into Fortress Road and going on eventually through the West End to a crossing of the River wherever it was possible to get over. The stories he had had from his pupils had often been full of fighting at the bridges and when there had still been official radio bulletins high-sounding phrases had spoken of military action there too.

But crossing the River would be a problem to deal with when he got there. It was the big intersection now.

He decided to go down from the bridge on the other side. A steep path had run there along the foot of the tumbling gardens of the houses perched on the hillside. It had come out on to Archway road about a hundred yards further down. He had relished it as a boy because of its safe imaginary dangers. The possibly real dangers of such a comparatively unfrequented place, even in those distant days, had been thrust well to the back of his mind. Or had he even not been aware of their existence?

He found the start of the path without difficulty. It looked much as he had known it all those years before, a narrow black asphalted track, perhaps a bit more greened over now than it had been.

But before he had got half-way down its steep slope it had become very different. Evidently from the days when municipal refuse collections had first faltered and had then ceased altogether the place had been used as a dump, when there was still rubbish to throw out – how little there was now – and cascades of the stuff lay tumbled on the sharply sloping bank above and rested in ever-thickening layers on the path itself. Cans of every size and colour, bottles by the thousand in a thousand different shapes, plastic containers with their drumming reds, yellows and blues still not faded, pieces from cars by the hundred, old seats, torn-off doors, wheels, rejected refrigerators and obsolete washing-machines, television-sets everywhere with their grey eyes blindly staring, cartons and containers, sheets of anonymous rusting metal, toy tricycles, toy guns, toy typewriters, toy telephones, paper in great wads and spilling bundles, some pasty grey, some still garishly bright, polythene bags resisting decay to the last, armchairs and mattresses with springs and coils of amorphous foam-rubber spewing out of them, sagging bedraggled discarded carpets and long curls of superseded vinyl wall-covering twisting and turning, shoes and sandals, plastic jackets and

nylon furs and the sodden remains of innumerable pairs of jeans, sunglasses and briefcases and transistors and tape-recorders and everywhere chunks and shapes of white-as-snow expanded polystyrene packing-pieces.

He wondered whether to turn back. But the steepness of the path behind him and the length of time it would take now to return to the top, walk all along the big bridge and at last make his way down by Tile Kiln Lane to a point actually some hundred yards or more further up Archway Road persuaded him to try going on.

To begin with the rubbish layers did not present too many difficulties. He was able to pick a way over the compacted slippery stuff, the slime of long-abandoned food mixed greyly with paper and rags, a still gaudy page or two from a colour magazine discernible among it. An occasional large cardboard carton, jutting up like a rock, appeared to present an obstacle until at a touch of his foot it collapsed to powder. Drink cans and aerosols lying everywhere seemed to be ready to roll treacherously under him. But he negotiated them all.

Yet before long the level of the piled-on layers grew higher and their solidity decreased. Attempting a jump on to what looked like the safety of an ancient divan-bed, he was canted in a sudden stomach-emptying collapse to land on all fours, one hand sinking deep into some black sliminess that gave off such a reek of gaseous metallic stench that he was nearly sick where he knelt.

He heaved himself back and wiped desperately his slime-blackened hand on the rotting divan. The lens of an abandoned camera winked at him from the mound below.

Cautiously he manoeuvred himself into an upright position before tugging out one of his grey much-washed handkerchiefs and plastering it across his nose.

Again he considered going back. What stupidity to have put himself at the risk of some such accident as his leap on

to the divan had caused. He could lacerate himself on some jutting piece of glass. He could break a leg and lie here taking a long time to die.

No. Go on down.

But go carefully.

Slowly, working out every step in advance, he made his way forward once more. His shoes filled with oozing matter. He had to remove the protective handkerchief so as to use both arms for balance. The stink grew worse, varied, brought him near to vomiting again, seemed to slacken a little. He was convinced that each sucking pace was going to tear one of his tyre-soles from its anchorage. But yard by yard he approached the path's end.

Once, momentarily distracted by the sight of a record-player apparently in perfect order – how much music had meant to him in the long ago – he misplaced a foot and for the second time lurched helplessly forward as something under him gave way. There was a wild scurrying and a whole nestful of ratlings squirmed and squeaked into new cover. With a heave of his whole body he managed to regain his balance.

And after this the refuse layers began to grow thinner and in another thirty or so careful jumping paces he saw the path itself again. On down he hopped in huge strides like an ungainly fleeing bird from clear patch to clear patch.

At last he reached the bottom and Archway Road once more.

Drawing in huge grateful breaths of fresher air, he sat on the ground, gingerly tugged at the laces of his shoes – the stitches on the tyre-rubber seemed to have held – managed at last to get the slimy soaking things off his feet and then peeled off his ooze-impregnated socks.

How absurd to have got himself into such a situation so near the start of his journey. And, as it had turned out, for

nothing. He had not spotted a single source of potential danger, only created more than enough for himself.

Despondently he teased his still wet feet into his second pair of socks and put on his shoes again. Pushing himself up, he resolved that from here on it would be the main roads and nothing but the main roads.

He set off, bullying himself to go at something like a trot to compensate for time ridiculously lost. No more mad escapades, he promised himself. No more whimses.

Within five minutes he came into sight of the big Archway intersection with the old Whittington Hospital, a towering mass empty and whistling, all yellow brick and pointed grey French château towers, on the far side of the wide road. He stopped opposite the last little corner shop before the hospital, its faded fascia still proclaiming 'Nova Hair Boutique'.

Carefully he looked down at the wide area, meeting point of eight roads. Here, if anywhere, there might be people. And people, five to one, meant danger.

Would there be one of the stills manufacturing arrack at the old Archway Tavern? He had heard that very often big old pubs were used. Or would that looming dark-grey high block of offices have been taken over as a barracks by the Armed Police? Or, perhaps worse, be the headquarters of one of the private armies? Or did those not actually exist?

He could see no sign of movement.

Yet the high-piled rabbit warren of the hospital opposite could well be concealing more than one marauding gang. The huge building that had been dedicated for a century to righting the evils of the human body – or had it in its last days been one of the places where they had busily turned suspected violent men into those will-less creatures nicknamed zombies? – could all too easily now be a hiding-place for those taking a savage joy in maiming the innocent.

The thought sent him running in a burst of panic, anywhere out of view of watching eyes there, tyre-padded shoes placking out in the silence.

Within a few strides his chest was heaving against the threadbare cloth of his buttoned jacket while the water-flask on his hip jogged in a wild rhythm and the Pernod bottle in his coat pocket swung and butted. But he could not bring himself to slow down. Ahead, one of the pedestrian tunnels leading to the old Underground station abruptly appeared, a pale yellow cavern. Not knowing whether he was right or wrong, he swung into its dark offered safety.

Safety or new danger? His steps twanged suddenly from the tiled walls on either side.

He brought himself to a halt and leant panting and sweaty against the smooth mosaic with, just visible in the fading light, its ancient interlacing patterns of paint-spray graffiti. Spume from a time-flush society, time-flush and gimmick-gorged.

At least he was out of sight here. Should he go further on in? Use the tunnel to get right across to Junction Road? What was the risk ahead? The grey day hardly penetrated even as short a way down as he had run and in front he could see only the faintest trace of light. Anybody might be using the place to hide in. But weren't there plenty of other lairs all round, most of them better for spying out dangers, or prey?

He decided to risk it.

He would have given now half he possessed to have had a good flashlight. But his last bartered-for dry cell had petered out a year before.

The tunnel he was taking sloped quite steeply down for about twenty yards more and then came to a T-junction. Cautiously looking round the corner there he found that the passage at right angles ran almost a hundred yards along to the right, all the way across Archway Road to the

Underground station. At its far end a shaft of daylight was visible.

It looked as though nothing blocked his way and he started forward, short step by short step in the gloom.

But he had not gone even five yards when at the far end there came a swift flurry of movement in the light-shaft and the sound of a shout, muffled but explosive.

Two men had appeared, caught in the distant slanting column of grey daylight as if they were figures in some three-dimensional film. The first, a monkey-like individual enveloped in an overcoat of garish green check, was clutching to his chest as he scuttled along a bright brown suitcase. On his heels came a giant of a fellow, head aureoled in black hair and beard, dressed in khaki trousers and leather jerkin, wielding some sort of long slender-shafted club. Plainly he was the one who had shouted.

Then, just within the column of light, the monkey-figure fell grovelling to his knees.

‘Spare me. Spare me.’

Transfixed, he saw the pursuer raise his odd-looking club high in the air. He felt the blood bolt up into his face.

Shout. He ought to shout. But instead of doing it he had thought it, and no sooner had the thought come into his mind than its contrary had risen up as well. If he shouted, that huge menacing man would turn, see him, come bounding towards him.

Silence kept him entangled.

But he did not attempt to retreat to the arm of the entrance tunnel. A chance to redeem himself might somehow arise.

And at least the giant’s club did not swish murderously down. Instead the fellow swung his foot full into the stomach of his crouching victim.

Who squeaked.

It was a laughable sound. Though far from being able to laugh, he recognised that the picture at the far end of the tunnel had for all its unpleasantness taken on an abruptly comic aspect.

Evidently the giant, too, felt it. Because he promptly delivered another kick, though a much less violent one. And again the crouching figure, still holding tight the cheap-looking tan-brown suitcase, squealed.

‘Oh, spare me, kind sir. Spare me.’

He realised then that the somehow comic victim was an Indian. The curious formality of even the few words he had uttered gave it to him, coupled with the black hair and dark complexion he was now better able to make out. And he guessed then the reason for the attack. Indians, in common with all coloured people, had had an increasingly bad time of it since at least the start of the First Riots. Tropicals, they had begun to be called, and they had been persecuted whenever anybody felt they could get away with it. So this poor devil must have been spotted by the giant with the club and simply chased. For amusement.

And it was plain the giant was amusing himself yet more now. Another jab with the foot. Another squeak.

‘Beats windows. Beats cleanin’ windows this.’

It had taken him some time to decipher the inarticulate sounds the giant had mouthed. But at last he got them. The fellow must have been a window-cleaner in the days when there had been windows and it had seemed important to keep them shining bright.

‘Case. Gi’ us tha’ case.’

It looked as if his demand had reached a core of resistance in the crouching Indian. He said nothing, but visibly tightened his arms round his bright brown suitcase.

At once the long club swung high. And as it did so he saw what it was. Its odd shape had been obscurely worrying him. It was a parking-meter. One of the old parking-meters,

a long circular metal shaft with at its head a lozenge-shaped box for collecting the coins and registering the time allowed. He had forgotten all about them. But he remembered now hearing of them being used as weapons in the riots, or at least until the second outbreak when the fighting had been more an affair of rockets, tanks and artillery.

Now the club's threat was quite enough for the terrified Indian. 'No,' he gasped out. 'No, sir. No.'

He wriggled round almost on to his back and thrust forward the suitcase. The window-cleaner lowered his parking-meter club, leant it carelessly against the wall behind him and took hold of the case between his ham-hands. Then, in one huge wrench, he tore top from bottom. The contents of the pathetically fragile object fanned out in a wild shower, clothes, half a dozen books, hundreds of sheets of white paper and apples. Little green apples tumbled and bounced everywhere.

The window-cleaner stooped, gusts of giggles coming from him, and scooped up as many of them as he could, stuffing them into the pockets of his jerkin. Then he straightened and looked at his victim again.

'Beats windows,' he said once more, his thick voice resounding blearily along the tunnel. 'Spent all my li' cleaning windows. Never saw nothing. All lies tha'.'

He picked up his long club and gave the now kneeling Indian another jab with it.

'But 'sfun now,' he went on. 'Fun all the ti'.'

The Indian sank back on to his heels.

'Ain't it?' the window-cleaner demanded. 'Ain't it? Fun? Fun?'

He swung the parking-meter back like a shovel, ready to push in another heavy jab.

'Yes,' the Indian squeaked out. 'Oh, yes, my good sir. The greatest fun, undoubtedly.'

‘Ha.’

The massive tormentor stood, legs astride, looking down at his prey.

He searched his brain for some way of putting an end to the business. But all he could think of was John Siggersthwaite.

John Siggersthwaite had been one of his father’s assistants, aged something over sixty, a bachelor, eking out a moderately parsimonious existence, quiet, unassuming, nice, dull. And one evening taking a solitary walk at the edge of Hampstead Heath he had been stopped by a couple of young men who had told him that they were police officers and that he looked like the suspect in a murder case. They had said they would take him to the police-station to check his identity. But, when somewhat apprehensively he had got into their car, they had driven instead to the most unfrequented part of the Heath, ordered him out and, to the accompaniment of a certain amount of jabbing with lighted cigarettes, had garment by garment stripped him stark naked. Then they had left, taking his clothes. It had been no more than a capriciously cruel joke, hardly recognisable then as an indication of the climate of the times. But it had been the end of John Siggersthwaite. He had never regained even the little self-confidence that he had had. Discipline in his classes had leaked away and – Dad had never been one for not getting full value from anybody he paid – quite soon afterwards he had been asked to resign. He had died two months later. Just died, the hospital had said –

‘Coat,’ said the window-cleaner, his voice rumbling down the tunnel.

‘Please?’

‘Coat. Thass ni’ coat.’

The head of the parking-meter club brushed over the garish green overcoat. Its little window caught the light and

twinkled sharply.

‘Yes. Yes, certainly. Of course.’

The Indian had got the message. He knelt forwards, hands plucking at the coat’s buttons, and then with an awkward twist of his whole slight frame pulled the garment off. He held it out.

‘Ha.’

The window-cleaner took it one-handed, swirled it round and settled it across his back. It looked like a hussar’s jacket.

‘Stan’ up.’

‘Yes. Yes, sir.’

Again violently he wished there was something he could do. But what was there? Brute strength ruled the day.

‘Trousers.’

The hulking window-cleaner loosed off another fit of loud giggles, the oafish sound tumbling along between the confining walls.

Involuntarily, he closed his eyes. What was about to happen? Some degrading act of sub-sex?

But he had to see, to know exactly what the worst was.

The little Indian was hopping absurdly from one foot to the other getting the trousers – they were grey flannel bags, dating from a doubly past age – down over his ankles and shoes. At last he completed the task. The window-cleaner at once caught hold of the end of each leg in a different hand with the club still easily grasped as well. There came a loud ripping sound.

‘Turn roun’. Turn roun’. Go on, turn roun’.

The Indian, who was wearing, he now saw, long white underpants coming right down to the calves, shuffled round.

Now it’s going to begin, he thought.

But his sick fears were not realised. With a bellow of a laugh the window-cleaner simply swirled his club round in a wide sweep and brought its flat head smacking on to the side of the Indian's white wool-clad hip sending him sprawling. Then, for no apparent reason, he turned away and stalked off up the slope of the far tunnel, the looted green overcoat swinging from his bench-broad shoulders.

For less than ten seconds he waited. Then he started forward to the distant shaft of light, sliding his tyre-shod shoes over the smooth floor in an effort not to make any sound.

He reached the far end and, ignoring the huddled figure of the Indian, he got down on to his belly and in obedience to the obscure memory of thrillers read long ago slid forwards until his head just came round the corner of the upward sloping tunnel.

He need not have bothered. The window-cleaner was nowhere in sight.

Slow sucking sobs were coming from the slumped figure on the floor.

'Are you all right?' he asked him quietly, once he was on his feet again.

The Indian rolled over and gave a loud groan.

He went across. The Indian groaned again. He dropped to his knees and gave him a pat or two on his uppermost shoulder.

The Indian pushed himself up on one arm. Peering at him, he saw that his face was a mess of tear-streaks.

'My dear sir,' came a sobbed greeting. 'Oh, my dear sir.'

'Are you all right?' he asked again, conscious of the absurdity of the question. 'I - I'm afraid I saw what happened, but I didn't ...'

'My dear sir, how could you? I very well understand. Oh, my head. My poor head is splitting.'

The Indian heaved himself into a sitting position, gasped as the weight came on to his bruised hip and then lurched forward till he was kneeling.

For some time they knelt there in silence, face to face. He wished fervently that there was still aspirin to be got. His own last supply had run out two or more years before and there had been times since when he had been driven to weeping despair by a thudding headache.

'Would you like a drink of water?' he asked at last, pulling his flask round to the front.

Ought he to give the chap some Pernod? But that was for Jasmine.

'My dear sir, thank you, but no. It is not water I need. It is safety. Safety from any more such batterings as that.'

'Well, perhaps I could see you on your way home,' he offered, inwardly cursing at the likely delay. 'Is it far?'

'Abandoned, my dear sir. Two days ago. I am making my way to Balham, if you will believe me. To a relative.'

The words had begun to flow more easily, rising over the occasional half-suppressed sob.

'Yes, a fellow in a comparatively humble occupation. Or so he was in the old days. A cook in a restaurant. But I have failed to introduce myself. Remiss. Most. I am Dr V. K. Satpathi. Doctor of Literature, let me hasten to add. Useless occupation nowadays. But one has to avoid being mistaken for a medical man.'

The crumpled brown face quivered in a prolonged sniff.

'You see, there is quite an Indian colony gathered in Balham now, and I had managed to contact my cousin's restaurant there by telephone. A question of dispensing a considerable sum in gold to the Armed Police. I was on my way across there. Safety lies in numbers, you know, for tropicals as they call us.'

'Yes,' he said.

And after a pause he added: 'Do you think you could stand now?'

'Yes. Yes, I must try. I must set forth again, though I fear it will be nearly dark now.'

It was certainly no longer possible for them to see much of each other.

'Let me help you up.'

He slid his hands over the little Indian's back till he found his armpits and then heaved. Dr Satpathi shrieked. But he ended at least up on his feet.

'I am afraid,' he murmured apologetically, 'that I am more than somewhat of a coward when it comes to physical pain.'

'Many of us have found that in the past few years. I had an abscess under a tooth last winter, and I hope I never have to go through that again.'

'My dear sir, I know what you mean.'

Peering down at the floor, he succeeded in locating Dr Satpathi's ripped trousers.

'I think they'll be worth putting on,' he said. 'Can you manage?'

'I must.'

It was a lengthy and awkward process, punctuated by frequent gasps and hisses of pain. He stood waiting, patiently as he could.

'Look,' he said at last. 'As it so happens I'm on my way to Wimbledon, and if I manage to cross the Thames, say, over Chelsea Bridge I would go through Balham. So would you like us to go together?'

He had made the offer reluctantly. If Dr Satpathi was as badly hurt as his gasps and groans indicated he would hardly be a quick walker.

'My dear friend, I will do my utmost. Fate could not have been more kind.'

He felt a pang of shame.

'Your suitcase,' he said. 'Perhaps we can string it together somehow.'

'No, no. It contained little but my papers. A book I once contemplated, a comparative study of Indian and European folk literature. But it was vanity to have brought it with me, sheer vanity. No, no. Let us set off straight away. Er - unimpeded.'

'Well, if you're sure.'

They found, when they had made their slow way to the top of the sloping tunnel, that it was almost completely dark. The moon he remembered - he had long ago developed the habit of knowing the lunar phases and hours - was not due to rise till some time between midnight and dawn, say at 3 a.m. by old clock-time.

The clouded sky was only a shade lighter than the masses of the tall buildings on either side of them. The wind seemed to have dropped but the air felt if anything colder. A settled chill.

However, it did not take them long to locate Junction Road, leading away from the big intersection, and they set off together along it, Dr Satpathi at once steering them out into the middle of the roadway.

'I have come to the conclusion,' he explained, 'that this is the safest way to walk. Fellows may well be lurking in any building.'

'Yes. Yes, I suppose you're right.'

Why hadn't he hit on this before? How ridiculous to have clung to the pavements as if it was the old days. Perhaps there would after all be benefits in walking with the little Indian. Certainly being grabbed at from some dark doorway would not improve his rate of travel.

They shuffled along down the slope of Junction Road, Dr Satpathi clearly incapable of going at more than a limping pace.

It was progress of a sort, and now that it was dark – once a main road like this would have been bright as day: all that light and heat that London had pulsed into the sky every night of the year – it would not have been possible to go all that much faster. But clearly the walk was going to take a good deal longer than he had at first counted on.

How many hours had gone already of the forty-eight that the odious Tommy had guaranteed to provide? Two or more at home making his preparations – shouldn't he have cut that down? – and since he had set out a good hour's walking time, allowing for that senseless expedition up on to the Archway, and probably another hour with Dr Satpathi in the tunnel. The best part of five hours gone. Forty-three still left. It ought to be plenty. But how many other encounters with people like the mad window-cleaner might delay him?

Suddenly his companion stopped short.

'What? What is it?'

'I – I don't know, my dear fellow. I thought I heard a sound.'

Standing statue still, he strained all he could to hear. Now that the wind had dropped it seemed almost absolutely silent. Cruelly silent.

'Nothing,' he said at last. 'Nothing, I'm sure.'

'Then let us proceed.'

They proceeded. As if, he thought, they were penitents of old shuffling their way round some enforced pilgrims' track.

Were they doing even two miles an hour? And how many miles was it to Wimbledon, or at least to Balham? He had never really known. In the days when he had made the journey before distances had been measured in times, Tube and bus times occasionally, traffic time more often. So many traffic-minutes in such-and-such conditions.

It was by no means easy to assess at all what progress they were making. The buildings on either side of the wide

road were almost invisible, vague looming shapes at most, giving him nothing to check by. What had they been, those buildings, in the old days? Hard to recall. He had a vague memory of small undistinguished shops, stragglers in the great commercial race.

‘Sssh.’

Dr Satpathi had come to an abrupt halt again. And once more he strained to hear some significant sound in the cold silence.

But there was not the least thing.

‘I think it’s all right. Shall we go on?’

‘Yes, yes, my dear fellow, if you think so.’

Damn it, the man was so scared. It was ridiculous. If they stopped every hundred yards or so like this they would still be going down the hill towards the centre of the city when dawn broke.

‘I am afraid, my dear chap, you must be finding me excessively timorous.’

‘No, no. It’s very natural, I suppose.’

‘No, I think not. But the fact is that that wretched business back there upset me more than I can tell.’

‘No, it was awful for you. Appalling.’

Dr Satpathi made no reply. But suddenly, after half a dozen more cautious paces, he gave a little chuckle. It almost caused him to stop dead in his turn. ‘What is it?’

‘It just struck me, my dear fellow, to ask whether I might not in the end prove like the hare in one of our Indian fables who coming to drink at a jungle pool unfortunately encountered a tiger.’

‘Yes?’

What was all this? But at least talking was keeping the fellow moving.

‘Well, you see, the hare by taking immediate and precipitate flight drew the tiger’s full attention to his

person, and, though he ran his hardest, he soon found himself in danger of imminent death. But luckily he chanced upon a convenient hole in the ground, what I believe is called an earth, and into this he plunged. Only to find that it was the home of a jackal.'

Dr Satpathi chuckled again. He sounded in the darkness absurdly merry.

'Well, but do you know what the hare did then? Intense fright had evidently stimulated his brain, like the man to be hanged in a fortnight of whom the great Dr Johnson spoke.'

'Yes.'

'Our friend brought himself to go up to the jackal and address him thus: "Maharaj, all the animals of the jungle have deputed me to beg you to be their king." "But," replied the suspicious jackal, "why did you not elect the elephant?" "Because he is altogether too lacking in brain power." "Why not the tiger then?" "Because he is not of a very dependable disposition." "Then why not the lion?" "He is so liable to fits of uncontrolled anger." "Then the bear?" "No, no he is not only extremely hairy but he is also a persistent victim of fever." So the jackal at last agreed to accept the *gaddi*, the throne. "Lead the way," he said, "and I will come to my people." But "Oh," replied the hare with fear-bought cunning, "it would not be fitting that I should go in front of a maharajah." So out went the jackal, only at once to be carried off by the waiting tiger.'

'Yes. A good story.'

But would the little nerve-shredded man at his side find in himself a similar resourcefulness in a crisis, he wondered. Certainly he had not done at all well in his encounter with the window-cleaner. And he himself? Heaven knows, he had felt scared enough almost all the time since he had set out, and worse than scared after the Happies had sailed so nonchalantly by. If he got into some tight spot, would he be able to bluff the jackal?

Perhaps just possibly he might. Perhaps there was a residue of human wiliness within him.

And at least Dr Satpathi's story seemed to have improved his own morale. He had not shown a sign of coming to a sudden nervous halt since he had told it.

They must be getting towards the end of Junction Road surely now. After all, it was not so lengthy. In the car or on a bus no more than a couple of minutes jockeying through the traffic. Ludicrous that it should be such a painfully long march now.

Then in the cold stillness he did hear a sound. He tried hard to isolate it above the soft shuffling of their own feet, and as it grew slowly a little louder he at last made it out.

'Doctor,' he said. 'Something coming. A car of some sort.'

Dr Satpathi stopped dead at once. Then, swift as a rat, he darted towards the slightly nearer pavement and its dark buildings.

He hurried across and joined him. They found a doorway, a fairly deep one, and retreated into it. The sound of the approaching vehicle - it seemed to his ears a good deal more grinding and purposeful than the Happies' dilapidated truck - grew steadily in the darkness.

Then, from round the corner at the crossroads ahead, a beam of light began to show itself. A twin-beam, it soon became apparent. He heard Dr Satpathi flatten himself yet more against the door behind them. Abruptly as the vehicle, whatever it was, swung round the corner, the light brightened. Just beside his head he read nervously the words that had become visible on an ancient cracked painted board. 'Cats Protection League'.

Cats Protection League, would it protect himself and Dr Satpathi, he asked with fear-provoked humour.

The sound of the oncoming vehicle grew to a grinding roar, and he guessed it must be tracked rather than wheeled. A moment later his deduction was confirmed

An armoured troop-carrier ground obliteratingly past in the centre of the roadway. From its rear flew a little pennant, but it was not possible to make out its colours.

But almost certainly an Armed Police vehicle, he thought. Out on patrol.

They waited in the Cats Protection League doorway, Dr Satpathi struggling to check a new outbreak of sobbing, until the sound of the grinding tracks had died totally away. Then, a good deal less confidently than before, they set out once more.

But at least, he found, their enforced halt seemed to have rested Dr Satpathi. His pace was surely faster than before, not much, but almost as fast as it was safe to go in the darkness.

Before very long he realised that at last they had reached the end of Junction Road. On his left, faintly visible, was the outline of the old Tufnell Park Underground station. Getting into Fortress Road presented no difficulty, and soon they were shuffling down its more steeply sloping length.

Time seemed to pass terribly slowly. Nothing marked it but the steady shuffle-shuffle of their steps, except once when Dr Satpathi stumbled on the edge of a pothole. How many minutes had passed? How many hours even?

Then at last they reached the next stage where Fortress Road joined Kentish Town Road – it had all looked so easy on the simplified map before he had set out – and almost at once away over to their right, probably in what used to be the big railway marshalling yards, they saw the glow of a fire, a faint reddish reflection against the dark sky.

It seemed to be no more than a small bonfire, perhaps lit by some wanderer to keep off the night cold, but as they slowly progressed its light began to show up the faces of the buildings on their left.

They managed to increase their pace a little.

One of the buildings, he made out, had been gutted almost completely at some time in the past. Only part of its front wall remained, with of all things a large sculptured coat-of-arms on it. What could the place have been? At once he remembered. A library. There had been a small public library just here with a big crest. Why should anyone have wanted to sack a library? Incomprehensible. Incalculable.

He shivered.

As they made their way onwards, the glow of the bonfire gradually faded behind them until at last it disappeared altogether making the darkness seem yet thicker. A few paces later Dr Satpathi came to a stop once more.

‘My friend,’ he said, ‘I fear I can no longer cope with this infernal opacity.’

He could not raise the ghost of a smile at the elaborate phrase. The declaration was not in any way something to be amused at.

Should he just go on alone? Leave the fellow to rest where he could?

‘Let’s try to push on a little further,’ he said. An idea came to him. ‘Perhaps you could tell another of your tales.’

‘From my store,’ Dr Satpathi said.

But he did not immediately either speak or move on. Then quite abruptly he began in the soft insinuating voice in which he had recounted the adventure of the timorous hare. And at the same time he started to shuffle forwards again.

‘There was once a cat who hoped to profit by his relationship to the lion, King of the Jungle. So he went to visit him and addressed him. “Sir, I am after all your cousin. Kindly find some position for me.” The lion considered. “What is it that you are able to do?” The cat did not find it easy to answer. “Well, sir,” he said at last, “I am able to miaow and also to purr and I can furthermore catch rats.” The lion needed neither the sound of any miaowing nor the soft susurrations of a purr. But, rather than hurt his lowly

relation, he suggested that the cat should catch him a rat. The cat fulfilled the task forthwith and brought the dead rodent to the King of the Jungle. The lion took the body and handed it back to the cat. "For the work you have done for me," he said, "let this rat be your reward." "But," said the cat, "in this way I am feeding myself only." "Yes," the King of the Jungle said, "that is the greatest service you can do for me." '

Dr Satpathi's voice ceased in the chill darkness.

How deliberately apposite had the story been, he wondered. Was it a quiet rebuke from the weak to the stronger? Or no more than a delicate way of conveying thanks to him for what he had done? Or was it, in a yet more delicate way, a means of pointing out to him that he had taken on a continuing duty?

He had not made up his mind when in the distance ahead he spotted what must be another light.

After a moment's consideration he pointed it out – a tiny white line – to his fearful companion.

'Well,' Dr Satpathi said, 'it does not look like a vehicle this time, and there is no noise.'

'Yes, stationary, I think. Shall we go on for a bit? We'd get lost completely if we tried to get round it.'

'Yes, my friend. I think a discreet approach.'

It took them perhaps five minutes to get near enough to be able to make out something of the source of the light, even though it grew brighter with every yard they got nearer and they were able to make better and better speed. But at last they saw that whatever it was came not from anywhere in the main road but from a turning off to the right.

And there was never any accompanying sound. Just a white light shining out into the night.

Or, he thought, into the evening that in this world was as dark as night.

They went cautiously on, and eventually got right up to the turning from which a strong diffused beam was emerging. But there was still no indication of its source.

He turned to Dr Satpathi.

‘I think I had better creep up and look,’ he said a little apologetically.

For the second time he got down on to his belly and squirmed forward. At length he got his head round the corner.

A sight he could not possibly have expected met his eyes. About a hundred or a hundred and fifty yards along the side road, outside a tall building, a small searchlight had been rigged up so that its beam shone full on to a large white noticeboard. On the board in lettering of a deep pink colour were the words:

‘We Need Praying Knees’

‘Welcome’

‘Peace is Here’

Part Three

Mark scrambled to his feet and beckoned to Dr Satpathi. Plainly they had chanced upon somewhere it might be possible for them both to rest for the remainder of the night, and with the way the little Indian had been only creeping forward after he had finished the story of the cat and the lion, finding somewhere to rest seemed by far their best course. If they were to start out again first thing tomorrow there would still be some thirty hours of Tommy's dreadful allowance left. And that should be time enough and to spare.

But what was this place? And would it be safe?

He watched Dr Satpathi read the blazing white noticeboard. 'We Need Praying Knees. Welcome. Peace is Here.'

'What do you think?' he asked.

Dr Satpathi did not answer. Peering at him in the light, he saw that he was shivering hard from cold.

'You think we ought to risk going down there?' he asked again.

'I think I must, my dear sir. True, they may not extend that universal welcome to - ahem - a tropical, but at this moment I have an overwhelming desire for their "peace". And besides I am deucedly chilly.'

It was this last admission that decided him. He was feeling cold enough himself and it was plain that Dr Satpathi, deprived of the protection of his garish green overcoat, might suffer badly if they stayed out all night. There had been people every winter found dead in the streets from exposure.

‘Come on then,’ he said.

They advanced along the side road, able to make out less and less of their surroundings because of the increasing glare of light reflected from the big white noticeboard with its pink-lettered message.

‘All prayer is good, I believe,’ Dr Satpathi said after a little. ‘Yet I am not sure I altogether trust that urgent need for additional knees.’

‘No.’

They reached the sign. It was attached, he saw, to the stubs of railings that had once barred off a flight of white stone steps leading into the tall building, now revealed as somewhere dating back to perhaps the turn of the century, a deeply indented pile in red brick striped with bands of pinkish stone. Looking upwards, he saw a fanciful skyline and, running all along the façade in incised art-nouveau lettering, the words ‘St Pancras Public Baths’. So it was in one of the old swimming-baths that these people, whoever they were, had established themselves. No doubt the building had been better preserved than many others and had seemed attractive to set up in. But to set up as what exactly?

There must have been a hidden peephole in the heavy double doors at the top of the steps because, before they had done anything to draw attention to themselves, one of the leaves was abruptly opened a cautious few inches.

In the spill-over of glare from the searchlight – it was a car headlamp fed by a wire snaking from the building – a man could be seen peering down at them. He was oldish,

probably in his late fifties, bald, with a beard cut with unusual neatness, stocky of body and dressed noticeably trimly in sweater and trousers. Between his hands rested a thick and knobbly cudgel. Yet for all his brisk appearance there was, he sensed, a sort of shrinkingness about him.

‘You have read our sign?’ he called out.

‘Yes,’ he answered quickly, anxious over any possible rebuff awaiting Dr Satpathi. ‘My friend here is not well. He’s been attacked and he’s very cold. Can you help us?’

‘All are welcome,’ the man answered without much evident warmth, though he did not appear to have been scandalised by the colour of Dr Satpathi’s skin.

He opened the door and stepped out. Behind him, Mark saw with a dart of anxiety, there were two more cudgel-armed men, each bearing an odd resemblance to the first even though one was much younger and the other had a head crowned by a mass of fluffy grey hair. But all three seemed to share a quality he found hard to pin down, a sort of wary blandness.

But it was too late to retreat now.

Putting a hand under Dr Satpathi’s elbow, he began to climb the steps. The three cudgel-carrying figures at the top did not budge.

‘Will you be praying knees for us?’ their leader abruptly demanded.

Mark halted. There had been a flicker in his voice of something very like greed.

Would he pray with these people? He was not really religious. Not even the leaden miseries of the past few years nor the sharp agonies he had gone through with Jasmine had revived in him the need to supplicate that he had known as a boy. But neither had he any strong anti-religious feeling.

In his cupped hand he felt Dr Satpathi’s cold-trembling become yet more violent.

‘Yes,’ he said, tumbling to a decision. ‘If you want praying knees we will pray with you.’

The watchful faces in the background disappeared. Their questioner stepped aside. They went up the last few steps and into the building.

The door behind them was promptly slammed shut by the bald man who had come in at their heels. Too promptly? Was it a trap sprung?

But all he did was call out.

‘Sister Raquel. Sister Raquel.’

One of two inner doors opened quietly – its wooden panel had been replaced by corrugated iron, no doubt when it had been taken for fuel as doors everywhere had been – and a woman in her late twenties or early thirties appeared. She reminded Mark, despite her short skirt and a pullover that did nothing to hide the femininity of her figure, of a nun. She had a look of aggressive obedience that he remembered.

‘Sister will look after you,’ the bald door-keeper said dismissively, climbing up on to a high stool and perching there, his cudgel across his knees.

‘Come,’ the girl whispered, as if the tattered little entrance to the baths with its ticket-seller’s box and its still remaining posters advertising a dance was the vestibule of a church.

Relieved at least that even just inside the building it felt much less cold, Mark followed her with Dr Satpathi still holding his arm.

She led them through what must once have been part of the changing-rooms, but with rows of sharp-smelling hens in the old wire clothes-baskets sleepily clucking as they passed, and then they came directly into the bath itself.

A hollow ringing sensation struck Mark’s senses even before he had had time to take in the deep sloping empty pool and the huddled clumps of people down on its tiled

floor and round its edge. No doubt the sound was produced simply by the tiles everywhere – there was even a tall crudely executed tiled mural on one wall, a pink and red design on a black background – and by the glass panes in the high tunnel-domed roof. But even the quietest noise there echoed and twanged, and afterwards whenever he thought about the place he heard that tingling high-pitched gloss on every sound.

Yet the groups on the floor of the pool and up on its broad surround were anything but noisy. There were a good many children – and, Mark saw, more women by far than men – but even though they were chattering a little the combined sound of their voices did not rise above a murmur. A murmur that sang, however.

‘There are some vacant places at the Deep End,’ Sister Raquel whispered.

In the light – orangey-dim electric bulbs hung from the ceiling: they must have a generator – Mark saw now that Dr Satpathi was in a worse condition than he had realised. Not only was he still limping heavily, but his face had also suffered when he had been knocked down and a dull contusion was thickening all his left cheek. As if conscious of the bad impression his appearance might give, he tried now to hold his ripped trousers together in front of himself, making his gait yet more shuffling.

Plainly it had been right to decide to take temporary refuge here. But what had their pledge to be praying knees committed them to?

Sister Raquel took them, a head-bowed figure, to collect from what had been the men’s changing-room a thin old foam mattress to share between them and a couple of blankets and she showed them the lavatories, clean as such places once had used to be even if there was no running water. But there was paper to use, a half-ripped away copy of a cookery book called *High on the Hog*.

Burdened with their bedding they made their way to the Deep End ladder and Mark succeeded in getting Dr Satpathi down it and establishing themselves in a small area bounded by one of the blue lines which had once guided swimmers as they had happily trolled their lengths. Taking the Pernod bottle out of the pocket of his burberry before wadding it up to give the little Indian some additional comfort, he was struck by an acute sense of shame at its clearly printed bright red label. Hastily he explained how he had come to be carrying it, hoping though he did not like to raise his voice much to be overheard by the people next to them, a young man distinguished by a more than unusually numerous crop of boils on his face and neck, his wife who was nursing a subduedly wailing baby and a little girl of five or six clutching with quiet obstinacy the chipped and battered remains of a large talking doll.

He had just finished his over-elaborate account of Jasmine's need for this particular drink when there was a stir of movement all over the big echo-tingling place. Faces, pinched and pale as faces always were but with an odd half-attained serenity about them, craned one and all upwards. He looked towards where they were gazing so unanimously.

Up on to the tubular skeleton that had once held the diving-boards, burned long ago no doubt, a man was climbing. He was dressed in a long robe made of some white sheeting, impressive enough despite its amateur-drama air. Or perhaps, Mark thought, there was a certain force of personality emanating from its wearer, for all that he was busily occupied in getting to the top of the tower without catching his floppy garment on any of the bars.

But, whatever it was, here was a force not altogether to be lightly regarded.

Mark turned a little uneasily to Dr Satpathi. But the Indian, half sitting half lying propped on the wadded burberry, had his eyes closed in sleep.

At last the climber reached the top and stood with legs braced on one cross-strut and thick pink hands grasping another. The face, too, was a deep pink with, clear to see on forehead and cheekbones, a number of stubby protuberances as if his feelings like a thick paste inside him were on the point of bursting out at any moment.

A hush had fallen over the whole big reverberating hall. Even the smallest children were not making a sound.

Mark's shoulders twitched. He could feel emotion stored behind him, as charged as a heavy voltage of electricity.

'We shall not want.'

The white-robed man pronounced the words rollingly. The tiled walls sang with them.

'We shall not want.'

The massed response came back like tingling thunder.

'We do not fear.'

'We do not fear.'

Dr Satpathi had woken from his doze and pushed himself upright, twisted on to one side so as to spare his bruised hip.

The preacher, his lumpy face already beginning to shine with sweat, repeated the litany. The gathering all round sent it surging muffledly back. Again, again, again and again.

Mark found himself half-responding to the hypnotic effect of the reiterated reverberating sound. Fiercely he told himself that he was where he was only because it was sensible to take a rest.

'We shall not want.'

'We do not fear.'

At last the preacher allowed the chant to die away. A silence hung in the air, part replete, part still expectant.

'May the Great Spirit which is and ever shall be grant us at our ending the everlasting rest which we are promised. May it come soon. May it come softly. May it come sweetly.'

There was a single receptive murmur from, it seemed, every person in the high tunnel-domed hall.

‘Let us join hands in amity and sing.’

The young boil-covered husband next to Mark stretched a hand across the blue-tile dividing line between them. Mark glanced at it and shook his head in a tight gesture of negation. The fingers of the hand snapped softly but imperiously.

Mark felt yet more of a fool. But no doubt this was in part at least what he had promised them when he had agreed to be a pair of praying knees, a small price to pay for the comfort Dr Satpathi needed. He grasped the young man’s hand – its palm was hotly moist – trusting that payment would not extend much beyond this.

He saw from the look he was given that he was expected to take Dr Satpathi’s hand, just as the boily young man was grasping his small daughter’s who in turn held one of her mother’s. Dr Satpathi seemed entirely ready to co-operate.

‘Eternal Father, strong to save ...’

The words of the old hymn rolled out, a little changed he realised. In place of the familiar plea ‘for those in peril on the sea’ there was a call now for help ‘ ’mid dangers that we cannot see.’

Well, those there were certainly. And if the huddled people here were not necessarily receiving help from above to avert them they were at least safer where they were than outside. The thought of staying with them, of giving way, was tempting.

He joined the singing. If for no other reason than a suspicion that it would be a mistake to antagonise the boil-pocked young man gripping his hand.

Dr Satpathi, he heard, had also added his voice, a reedy tenor, to the surging boomy chorus, his earlier distrust of ‘the need for additional knees’ apparently forgotten.

‘Abide with me.’

The shivery Victorian hymn followed, beloved once of Cup Final football crowds, eighty or a hundred thousand voices joining together before a match most of them had paid half a week's earnings and had travelled the length of the country to see. That had all been a long time ago, an impossible time.

'Change and decay all round I see.

'O Thou who changest not, abide with me.'

And was that yearning so wrong? To hope that a future awaited on the other side, one not greyly deprived and shot through with blood-red danger streaks? He felt the swirl and sweep of it all moving over him. Warm, reassuring, easy.

Dr Satpathi's hand in his hand had become moist as the young husband's. It seemed he had found the safety he had craved sooner than he had expected. The long tramp to Balham and that colony of fellow Indians would not be necessary now.

The deep reverberating singing went on and on, broken every now and again by a return to the litany they had earlier chanted. 'We shall not want.' 'We do not fear.' Mark reckoned that hours, two, three or even four, must have passed. He had surrendered almost totally to the hypnotic effect of it all. He no longer tried to think. At some time it must come to an end, and then he would attempt to see where he stood. But in the meanwhile, his hands riveted to those of the young husband and Dr Satpathi, he let it happen. Dream-lost.

And then at last, whether in obedience to some inner signal in the preacher's consciousness - perhaps he was simply on the point of exhaustion: his pink lump-marked face had become a muddy-grey - or whether because some pre-set period had come to an end, it was over. The preacher simply did not lead them into another hymn or another round of chanting, and after a short pause he

produced from somewhere under his flowing robe a small grubby-looking piece of paper.

He peered at it and then spoke again.

‘Fuel gathering,’ he said in a distinctly more workmanlike voice, making Mark wonder if in the old days he had not been a non-conformist minister or an enthusiastic young vicar.

‘Fuel gathering for the boilers. Peter tells me that stocks are getting low, and perhaps you have all felt that the radiators have not been as warm as they can be. So from tomorrow we shall send out an extra party. David will lead it. Be ready if he calls on you.’

Mark saw his neighbour, whose hand he had dropped as soon as the singing had ended, square his shoulders.

It came to him, with immense relief, that if some of these people left the place on occasion he himself ought to be able to get out. Because he knew now, now that the chanting and singing no longer enveloped him, that whatever safety there was here for Dr Satpathi he himself was going to be off again walking to Wimbledon as soon as it was light. The call which Jasmine made to him was stronger by far than any hopes of safety.

‘But some good news,’ the preacher went on. ‘The wind has been much stronger and the batteries are well charged. So we can have the lights on a little later. But on the other hand it has not been raining these last few days, and the tanks are going down faster than we like. So, please, please, use as little water as you can. Remember what happened before. There were people killed over by Regent’s Park in fights for water.’

He stopped to let the warning sink in. And Mark, who had heard much the same rumour from some of his pupils – only with them the fights had taken place in Golders Green – wondered whether he was not deliberately keeping his congregation in a state of frightenedness, giving them a

sort of communal bugaboo. But the tales could be perfectly true.

‘Now,’ the preacher resumed – the pinkness was stealing back to his face highlighting the knobby lumps – ‘will the servers please distribute the rations.’

A number of women got up, went through a door still marked ‘Showers’ and returned with baskets of flat round loaves which, though they were a dull grey colour, reminded Mark of the excellent crusty Greek bread he had used to buy at a local delicatessen before it had been wrecked in the First Riots. He contrived to push the thin stick of bread he had baked himself under the edge of his wadded burberry and when he and Dr Satpathi were offered a quarter of one of the big round loaves he accepted.

Unfair to take advantage of what seemed to be simple charity. But a lot of miles lay between him and Wimbledon next day and he would need all the sustenance he could get.

He sat and chewed at the tough doughy stuff, and then quite suddenly felt overwhelmed with tiredness.

‘A sleep and a forgetting.’

‘What was that, my dear fellow?’ Dr Satpathi asked.

‘Sorry. Muttering aloud. I’m stupid with tiredness.’

He lay back on the thin old foam mattress.

He had expected to fall asleep at once, but no sooner had he shut his eyes than his mind began to race with sharp nightmarish thoughts. Was this place as innocent as it appeared to be? What about the greed with which they had seemed to gather in more praying knees? Was it after all going to be so easy to leave in the morning? When the boily young man had let go his hand just now, was it because he felt a bond had been knotted?

Jaggedy visions of the day past added themselves to his state of turmoil. The out-of-the-blue trickle of ringing from his long-buried telephone. The Happies’ truck, swaying and

unpredictable and ominous. The long empty streets and the black-eyed window-less houses. Mrs Brillings's tinny voice saying 'She's dying, Mark. She wants to see you.'

To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

He groaned aloud.

'You are not asleep, my dear fellow?'

He opened his eyes.

'No,' he said. 'No, I can't seem to get off. It's noisy, I suppose. That wretched little girl squeaking her doll.'

The girl extracted at that moment a particularly loud grating bleat from the rosy plastic object she so obstinately clutched. He winced.

'One moment,' Dr Satpathi said.

He pushed himself up, not without a little moan of his own, and slid over to the girl.

'Would you like me to tell you a story?' he asked.

The girl regarded him with suspicion.

'This story,' the little Indian said with unexpected firmness, 'is called the Tale of the Fat Merchant and the Three Hyenas. Once upon a time there was a very fat merchant who met three hyenas one day. To the first he said "What an ugly brute you are" and the hyena chased him all the way back to the village. When he met the second he said "Really, you are a creature of rare beauty" but the hyena went to his house and ate four of his chickens. When he met the third hyena the merchant just said "Ram-Ram" which is our way in India of saying "Good day". And the hyena looked at him and said "Ram-Ram" also.'

The little girl was wide-eyed.

'Is that all?' she asked at last.

'Yes. It is not a very long story.'

'Tell another.'

'Very well, if you will sit quiet and not play with your doll.'

‘All right. But it’s got to be long.’

‘I shall do my best.’

‘And it’s got to be nice. Like the Praying.’

‘We shall see.’

Dr Satpathi turned and pulled the wadded burberry across the blue line separating their two camps. The girl sank down against her mother.

Mark closed his eyes again. He could half-hear the softly lilting voice embarking on a new story, an involved affair about a pundit, whom Dr Satpathi described as being ‘somewhat like the gentleman who led us in the Praying’. The pundit’s wife had nagged him into going to beg from the King, but he had refused to accept anything unless it had been earned by the King himself. So the King, complaisant fellow, had gone out at night dressed in rags and had carried water, rather badly, for a householder, eventually earning four *paisa*. ‘They are what pennies are called in my country. Do you know what pennies are?’ ‘Yeh, silly, I play wiv ‘em, an’ the silver ones.’ The pundit’s wife, of course, had been highly displeased with so petty a haul and had thrown the despised coins into something called the *tulsi* pot, a sort of sacred flower-urn. And, naturally, up had sprung Jack-and-the-Bean-stalk plants laden with seeds of gold.

Sleep came.

When he awoke he saw that it must be just about dawn. In the tunnel-domed roof where the big panes had not been replaced by wood or cardboard the first faint greyness of day made pale squares.

So how many hours had passed? It was his first thought. Sunrise must be at about a quarter past seven, old time. So now it would be just on seven. Fewer than thirty hours left of Tommy’s forty-eight. Twenty-nine only in fact. Twenty-nine hours.

But that should be more than enough to get across to Wimbledon, even without the company of Dr Satpathi. Which might have been as much a hindrance as a help.

If he got away from here. But surely they wouldn't try to keep him.

Cautiously he sat himself up, partly so as not to draw attention to himself, partly not to disturb little Dr Satpathi, lying beside him curled into a ball.

The sight of him brought quite unexpectedly into his head the conclusion of the story of the pundit. He must have heard the last part of the tale before he had actually dropped into full sleep.

The King, he remembered, had got to hear about the magical gold-fruited plants growing in the pundit's *tulsi* pot and, seeking jewels for his daughter's wedding, had come to see it. They had dug up one of the four plants and, behold, it sprang from a *pais* earned by the sweat of the royal brow.

A moral tale indeed. He wondered exactly why Dr Satpathi had chosen it. But perhaps he had been unable on the spur of the moment to think of anything else that would meet his obdurate audience's demand for something 'nice, like the Praying'. Or had there been some other subtle reason?

But no time to sit thinking about that now. Get up instead and spy out the land.

He began heaving himself out of the blankets. Dr Satpathi gave a groan and opened his eyes.

'Hello,' he said to him. 'Are you feeling bad?'

The little Indian unrolled himself and lay on his back considering.

'No,' he said at last. 'No, my dear chap, I am not feeling too bad at all.'

He propped himself up on one elbow and gave a small deprecating smile.

‘I am afraid,’ he said, ‘that not for the first time I must have over-dramatised my fairly trifling physical woes. Today I think you will find me an altogether swifter companion on the march.’

‘But – but I thought you’d be staying here.’

‘Staying here? No, no, not at all.’

‘But they seem to be all right about having you, and you seemed to find it sympathetic last night. You’re a religious man, aren’t you?’

‘I am.’

For a little he was silent.

‘Yes, I am religious. And these people are too. And, yes, I believe they would have no objection to a tropical. But nevertheless I have no intention of staying.’

‘But why not?’

‘It is a little difficult to account for.’

Suddenly he smiled, a flash of brightly white Indian teeth.

‘Shall we say that I must have chosen that story last night chiefly in order to tell something to myself. What is the meaning of that tale after all? That work, work in the world, is, as we say in India, the noblest *dharma*, the best lot. No, my dear fellow, I think that rather than attempting to lose myself here nightly in the Praying, as they call it, I should make my way to Balham and there among my fellow countrymen take up the ancient and not dishonourable profession of village storyteller.’

Mark considered.

‘Yes,’ he said after a little. ‘Yes, if you see it like that, then the sooner we get on our way the better.’

‘You fear a little too much greed for praying knees?’ Dr Satpathi said, uncoiling gracefully to his feet. ‘You may be right. I think not. I hope not. But we must see.’

Part Four

There proved when it came to it not to be any real difficulties about leaving the Baths, only silent disappointed looks from Sister Raquel and various fidgety delays which infuriated Mark, though Dr Satpathi seemed to accept them patiently enough.

They returned their mattress and blankets to the store. They accepted some breakfast even, more of the flat grey doughy bread. They used some of the community's supposedly running-down water supply.

An almost complete whodunit, gaudily jacketed, in the lavatory this morning. Relic of a time-slipped era.

But at last they were able to step out into the street and Mark heard with a perceptible lightening of spirit the heavy double doors slam behind them. He drew in a deep breath. The gusting wind of the day before had not returned and the grey mistiness was penetratingly cold.

They must keep up a good body-warming pace. And for him it would be doubly necessary. At a guess nineteen or twenty of the odious Tommy's promised ration of hours must have gone. Twenty-eight only remaining. It should be an ample allowance. He was after all walking to Wimbledon, not Wales. But time for accidents ought to be left. As much as possible.

'Shall we go then?' he said to Dr Satpathi.

‘By all means, my dear fellow.’

Within a couple of minutes they were back in Kentish Town Road, its wide pot-holed surface sloping gently down in front of them till it disappeared in the mist. There was no sign of activity of any sort, only to either side the boarded-up and barred-over empty shop-fronts with here and there an old painted sign or washed-out poster still visible. ‘Bingo Today’, ‘Let us Design Your Dream Kitchen’.

They stepped out along the roadway, brownish where its wood-blocks showed through the unrenewed tar.

‘We could be in Balham by early afternoon,’ Mark said cheerfully, ‘and then I’d get to Wimbledon quite shortly after.’

‘Well, I am prepared for a cracking pace,’ Dr Satpathi answered. ‘My bruises are certainly much less incommoding.’

‘I’m delighted you’re so much better. And you even came to my rescue last night.’

Dr Satpathi chuckled.

‘From that five-year-old dragoness with the squeaky doll? I only wish all the physical hazards we may encounter yield as easily to the storyteller’s art.’

Mark laughed.

‘Tell me some more stories. They’ll while away the miles.’

‘Very well, my dear fellow.’

But the Indian, walking with hardly a limp now, once more took a considerable time in choosing from his store.

Mark was on the point of prompting him again when abruptly he began.

‘Once upon a time – I adopt the European gambit, you understand – a man was taking a snooze under a large and shady tree. Suddenly he awoke to discover that the tree had all along been concealing a bear, now climbing down the trunk towards him. The fellow was greatly disconcerted.

“If I run,” he said to himself, “the animal will surely catch me, but if I stay he will equally certainly cause me some considerable mischief.” Better, he decided, to stay and do what he could.’

At the corner of a turning on the left a group of three dogs appeared. They stood still and stiff-legged, watching as they made their way past, footsteps seeming all at once harshly loud and Dr Satpathi’s gentle story-telling voice monstrously noisy.

‘So just as the bear was on the point of reaching the ground, our friend caught hold of its forepaws. The bear could do nothing, but neither could the man. Round and round the tree the pair of them danced, with all the coins which the man kept wrapped in a corner of his *dhoti* one by one falling to the ground. However, a traveller chanced to pass by, and our friend had wit enough to call out to him “I say, coins are falling from this bear’s anus and the more we are dancing the faster they come.” Immediately, of course, the traveller volunteered to take our friend’s place, who in that manner lived to fight another day.’

They had come to a place Mark remembered well, where a big low yellow-brick rail viaduct crossed the road, spanning as well the equally broad Camden Street forking off to the left. It had once had small public gardens on either side of its massive pillars. Now overgrown shrubs and tall desiccated weeds made a matted thicket which hid the brickwork to a height of ten or twelve feet.

He put a hand on Dr Satpathi’s arm to halt him while he made a careful examination of this possible hiding-place. But he could see nothing that stirred inside it.

They went on, going through the bridge – water dripping heavily from the blackened brickwork above – and down towards the next big road junction. If he recalled it correctly, it would have Camden Town Underground station on the right and a big pub, the Mother Red Cap, on the left.

The Mother Red Cap had been a stopping place on his London walks with his father's students. A short talk about the place of 'the Pub' in English social life – all that seemed centuries ago – and then a mini-dissertation on the origins of the name Mother Red Cap. How possibly she had been the original of Mother Damnable of Kentish Town in Cromwell's day, a widow at whose house the notorious Moll Cutpurse had lodged. And that did not seem such centuries ago now.

'Can you rise to another story?' he asked Dr Satpathi. 'I suspect that last one was carefully chosen.'

The Indian gave him one of his sudden-sun smiles.

'Well,' he said, 'perhaps so, but I could not counsel anyone to rely for moral guidance altogether on the folk-tales of India. They are, for one thing, decidedly contradictory. And nor am I sure that I myself would be able to follow the advice I have just been giving were I truly to land in any sort of a fix.'

'We must just hope then that we don't,' Mark said.

And then he came to a full stop.

The big intersection ahead – it had come into view as they had mounted the crest of the bridge taking the road across the old Grand Union canal – was alive with people. There must be, he calculated, at least fifty of them, men and women, moving about, standing leaning against the wall of the big pub, the Mother Red Cap he had remembered, and even sitting on the pavements and in the roadway.

Fifty people. And – it came to him with a lurch of dismay, though he had known it inwardly from the moment he had seen them – every one of them drunk.

The Mother Red Cap must be then one of the arrack manufactories his rumour-bringing pupils had talked about.

All that he had heard about the gang that had attacked the beer tanker by Highgate Station came back to him. The

senseless beatings-up, the huge bonfires, the rapes. Would it be the same here? Arrack was distilled liquor surely. Spirits. Crude spirit. Its effects would be worse than those of beer, much worse.

‘What – what shall we do?’ he said to Dr Satpathi, equally frozen to a halt beside him.

‘It seems to be some sort of drunken dance unless I am much mistaken.’

It was. Or at least a dozen or more of the drunks were swaying round together, holding hands, dipping and swaying, and the sound of aimless singing drifted up too.

They must have been at it all night. Getting drunk and staying drunk.

‘We must steer clear,’ he said. ‘Steer well clear. God knows, if they spot us they may do anything.’

‘Yes. You are no doubt quite right. Though they look harmless enough at the moment.’

‘Damn that. We’ll have to find a way round.’

He pulled Dr Satpathi back and took shelter behind the jutting wall of a building just before the bridge.

‘I’ve got a map here,’ he said, tugging the old sheet out. ‘Only a bus one, I’m afraid, but with any luck it’ll show us the lay-out of the streets round.’

He unfolded it and peered at its maze of pinky-red lines.

Dr Satpathi sighed.

‘One’s reading-glasses would have helped,’ he said. ‘But, alas, those went at Archway.’

‘Yes,’ Mark answered, trying to focus the little print.

It swam at last into clearness.

‘Yes. I remember now. It’s marked here, where the buses used to go round to avoid the congestion at the crossroads. You see? They used to go down here, Camden Street. And I remember there used to be a big bus-stop just behind the crossroads. Somewhere here. We could go the same way.’

‘We won’t get lost? I am afraid I have only the sketchiest notion of our route.’

‘I think it will be all right. But we’ll have to risk it anyhow. We can’t take the chance of falling into the hands of those people.’

He felt he was being sensible. Drunks might not be as wholly incalculable as Happies, but they were likely to be a good deal more vicious.

But what if they did get lost? It would be easy enough to do, without direction signs, with no one to ask, with their map little better than a sketch-plan. And the further off their intended route they were forced the worse it would be. Yet the risk must be taken.

‘We’ll have to go back as far as the viaduct,’ he said to Dr Satpathi. ‘Camden Street should keep us clear of them then.’ Would it? They could only try.

They hurried back to the massive yellow-brick rail-bridge and swung around the corner into Camden Street, Mark completely careless now whether or not there was anyone lurking in the high tangles of vegetation that had once been neat little examples of municipal gardening.

Camden Street, wide as Kentish Town Road, appeared so far as they could see to be equally deserted. They set off along it, keeping now without discussion to the far pavement rather than the brownish roadway. As far from the drunks as possible.

Ahead to their right now the huge mass of the old A.B.C. bakery stood up against the grey of the sky, cliffs and towers of dirtyish cream. They crossed over the canal again, a high-piled floating mass of rubbish.

In the distance Mark could just make out the sound of the drunks’ singing, a faint sea-like murmur, caught and gone.

At the far end of the huge bakery – a cat appeared at one of its high smashed-open windows, mewed once and jumped down inside again – another wide road intersected

Camden Street, Camden Road according to the map. It led straight back to the big intersection.

Mark put a restraining hand on Dr Satpathi's arm as they came up to it.

'I'll creep to the corner and look down to the crossroads,' he said. 'There may be some of them wandering up towards us.'

He had whispered.

'Yes, yes. I will wait,' Dr Satpathi whispered back.

Cautiously Mark walked over towards the corner of the big cream-coloured bakery. Pasted to its wall was a rain-paled notice saying in fat red letters, 'Danger Broken Glass'. For an instant he was able to smile at the irony of it. Then he thought of the reeling ungoverned drunks.

For the third time in the course of his journey he got down flat on his stomach and began pulling himself forward by his forearms.

He reached the corner. It smelt of animal urine, strong as a harsh disinfectant.

He gave a last shove forward, grit scraping beneath him.

'Boooo!'

He actually screamed at the sound.

It was absurd. He knew it almost as he opened his mouth. If a loud male voice goes 'Boooo' at you, you are not being killed or even being attacked. But the surprise had been too much for his stretched nerves.

Before he had done more than realise how ridiculous he was being, a heavy figure dropped from one of the bakery windows above and landed with a crack of nailed boots, straddling him.

'Just my joke, old boy. Saw you playing cowboys. Couldn't resist it.'

He rolled over on the grit-strewn pavement.

The man above him looked like a soldier despite the lack of insignia on his green-and-brown camouflage battle-smock. But, something seen hardly anywhere outside the Army and the Armed Police, he was crisply clean-shaven and his pale-coloured hair – he was going a little thin on top – was trimmed quite short. The eyes in his ruddy-complexioned face were of an intense bright blue and were alight with pleasure.

It could only be pleasure.

At his belt he had a pistol on a lanyard and in his right hand was a club made of all things from an old cricket bat wrapped with two or three layers of what must have been roofing lead.

‘Who are you?’ Mark demanded. ‘What do you want?’

Was this another madman like the window-cleaner?

And Dr Satpathi, had he got into hiding somewhere? He dared not look to see.

‘Name of Parkinson. Brian Parkinson. Don’t want anything really. As I say, I just saw you and thought I’d give you a bit of a fright.’

He grinned.

It showed the schoolboy just underneath the ruddy-faced adult.

‘Let me get you on your feet again,’ he added, extending a beefy red hand.

Mark took it. There seemed to be no reason not to. The fellow looked friendly enough.

As he came upright he saw that Dr Satpathi – silly fool – had not even moved.

‘Yes, well,’ said Brian Parkinson, ‘I just wander around, you know. Seeing what goes on. Poking my nose in a bit. Keeping chaps in their place sometimes. But what was all that crawling about for?’

Mark felt a prickle of resentment.

‘There’s some trouble down there at the crossroads, by the Mother Red Cap,’ he said. ‘Arrack mania. My friend and I are trying to get to South London and they’re in the way.’

The soldier-like Brian Parkinson gave a sudden guffaw.

‘Funny way of getting past,’ he said, ‘going in the opposite bloody direction.’

‘It wasn’t the opposite direction,’ Mark answered tartly. ‘And anyhow, what would you have done? Gone right through them?’

His sharpness only produced once again the boyish grin.

‘Exactly, old chum. Go right through them, only way with rabble like that.’

‘Rabble who looked more than capable of battering us both to the ground?’

‘Kick ‘em in the balls first, old boy. That’s my motto. Kick the other bugger’s balls before he kicks yours. Only way to get by in this world today.’

His grin shot out yet again and the intense blue eyes shone yet bluer.

‘Though actually it’s not such a bad world now, you know. Find it rather agreeable really. Lot better than before all this began. Know what I was then?’

He seemed to expect an answer.

‘I’ve no idea,’ Mark said, beginning to think how he could get away.

‘Bloody stockbroker, old boy. Spent half my time buying shares worth nothing and selling them when I’d put the price up, me and my like. Had a wife and two kids out in Barnet, did a bit of hang-gliding at summer weekends. Bored to tears.’

But while he had been giving his account, with more than a touch of pride in his having so completely abandoned his old life, Mark’s attitude to him underwent a rapid change.

No, he would not try to get away: he would use this madman to help them.

‘Look,’ he said.

And he told him about their problem. How he himself needed to get to Wimbledon as quickly as he could to see his wife who was very ill – no need to mention that she was no longer his wife – and how he had encountered Dr Satpathi, ‘a distinguished academic before’, who wanted to get to friends in Balham. ‘So, well, if you really are just wandering where your fancy takes you, would it be possible for you to come with us?’

‘Can do,’ Brian Parkinson said.

He glanced at the watch on his wrist. Mark saw that it was a thick elaborate one, no doubt with all sorts of refinements.

The time, he thought. A man who, somehow, still knows the time.

He felt a jab of unexpected envy.

‘Well,’ Brian Parkinson said, ‘pretty well oh-nine hundred hours now. We’d better get a bit of a push on.’

Oh-nine hundred hours. Nine in the morning. So his calculations had not been far out. If Mrs Brilling had rung at mid-day yesterday he had used up a good deal less than half those forty-eight hours. And now, with this ally, resourceful and apparently without fear, they need not worry about delays on the way. Yes, Wimbledon, by, say, four o’clock in the afternoon. It should be easily possible.

Brian Parkinson had turned and waved up Dr Satpathi. He told him in brief military terms what had been agreed and then swung sharply round and marched off in the direction of the Mother Red Cap.

‘Wait,’ Mark called. ‘Look, shouldn’t we really go round? Now that we’re clear of them anyhow?’

‘Tommyrot, old boy. Bash trouble, it’s the only way. Come on.’

He turned again and advanced down towards the intersection. Mark decided there was nothing for it but to follow.

'Fact is,' Brian Parkinson threw out over his shoulder, 'the watch stopped once, about eighteen months ago. Never been quite sure since whether I've got the exact time.'

'No,' Mark said, experiencing a swift sense of deflation.

And, if the fellow was wrong about the time, was his ration of hours much shorter than he had worked out? But, no. He could not be all that much out. The fall of the light told him that.

They tramped down Camden Road, broad and straight, each pace bringing the arrack drunks more clearly into sight. The round dance that had been going on when they had first spotted them had come to an end, but even their smallest movements now, sluggish, sweeping and vague, showed how far under the influence of the crude spirit they all were.

A flurry of quarrelling broke out. Two big fellows with great broad faces so red they were almost purple had squared up to each other and were beginning to fling wild lumpen blows.

Mark contrived to put himself more directly behind Brian Parkinson. With that extraordinary club of his, let alone the pistol at his belt, he ought surely to be able to ward off any attack.

Twenty yards to go before the nearest of them. No one seemed to have noticed them at all, despite the way Brian Parkinson's nailed boots were ringing out on the wooden surface of the road.

Ten yards. A whiff of arrack reached Mark's nostrils. Harsh and spiritous. A man with a great swag of a belly, yet formidable enough to look at, was almost directly in their path. Brian Parkinson strode on, head high, as if there was no one else in the world.

Down just by the front of the Mother Red Cap there was a woman lying on her face. A woman, from her figure, of fifty or so. Her skirt was half rucked up showing a large flabby white buttock.

They reached the swag-bellied drunk. He plainly took in their presence. For a moment he glared. Then he turned and lurched away.

There was another odour now. The sharp mean smell of vomit.

Inside the pub – one of its double doors hung crazily wide – half a dozen drinkers were lounging across the marble-topped bar, dipping cups and bright plastic mugs into tubs of the raw spirit, jostling and laughing. Behind the bar the oil painting purporting to be the beruffed presiding genius of the place, moved by someone from its old position, surveyed the scene crookedly. A hole had been poked in the top of its canvas.

Brian Parkinson, at the precise mathematical centre of the junction, wheeled smartly to the left in the direction of Camden High Street, running southwards, and marched on at the same cracking pace.

Mark wheeled in his turn. Dr Satpathi, terrier close at his heels, followed. In a few moments the road ahead lay empty before them.

They were through.

Mark's mind turned back to the Highgate tanker and the weeks of damage the gang there had done. Would they have been rendered harmless if there had been a Brian Parkinson to tackle them with similar breezy contempt? He found the question hard to answer. Too hard.

On their right, its window boards stripped away by looters, was the Black Cap pub, once famed as the Mother Red Cap's rival. Mark read the words 'Nightly Entertainment' still visible above one of its doors in gold letters. The rush to enjoyment. Jasmine had been avid for it.

It had seemed to her a right that transcended almost anything else. Or had it even been everything else?

Had he been wrong not to have stood out against that sooner than he had done, that one last row and parting? Yet could he have done? Perhaps it was possible only in the light of the London he was walking through now to see what had really been happening then.

Wife, wife, bane of my life.

There on the left was a big high painted wall-sign – what a pace Brian Parkinson was going at – saying ‘Trill’s for Typewriters’. Well, there was nothing to type now. Would there ever be again?

Abruptly into his head floated the memory of an occasion, years and years before, when he had had for some reason now lost in the sands to visit County Hall, the London government headquarters. As he had stood in the huge blank forecourt wondering which way to go, his attention had been caught by an odd sound, something between a murmur and a chattering. For some time he had been unable to pin it down. Then he had got it. It was the noise of the typewriters inside, scores and scores of typewriters churning out letters and memos and reports, vouchers and dockets, schedules and accounts, copies in triplicate, the minutes of the meeting of the ad hoc committee of the subcommittee.

And where were they all now?

They neared the end of the High Street with the old Mornington Crescent Underground station coming up at the meeting of two forking streets. And here, once more, there were people. But sober folk this time, it was easy to see. Evidently this was the meeting place for the inhabitants of one of the populated pockets in the great drained city. Men and women were moving here and there across the wide roadways with an air of everydayness. Several had buckets in their hands, no doubt going to fetch water from some

pumping-engine. Others had boxes or bags of goods to barter. There were children too, being led off down a turning to the left, perhaps to where some hedge schoolmaster like himself taught reading, writing, arithmetic.

But were even these worth acquiring still?

A young couple, teenagers, were walking down the centre of the roadway hand in hand. They came to an old woman plodding towards them, a water container made out of a battered two-kilo fruit can clutched in front of her, and as one they raised their arms high to make a pointed arch and skipped her through it. A look crossed her face that was a tiny battlefield between settled disapproval and a sudden unquenchable spring of pleasure.

Mark grinned.

Le cœur a ses raisons. Another of his old tags rose up. No doubt such reasonless reasons were still adding to the population every day.

Brian Parkinson was certainly showing no sign of caution in going into the little crowd. But, then, he was right. These were ordinary human beings, eking out what existence they could. No need to fear them, no point in fearing them.

'I thought we'd take the right fork here,' he puffed out. 'Down, I think it's Hampstead Road.'

'As you say, old boy.'

The striding soldier-figure swerved a little to the right and went on through the crowd. None of the wan apathetic faces took much interest in them. Only a young woman sitting underneath the small time-worn statue of Cobden there – doughty fighter against the price-raising Corn Laws, he had been another mini-lecture subject; but there had never been any minilectures about the big casino that had stood just opposite – called out to them in a half-hearted way. She had an ancient basket half-full of potatoes beside her and wanted to barter them some.

Then, soon after they were past the gathering, Brian Parkinson stopped short and stood head cocked like a hunting dog's.

'Don't much like that screaming,' he said.

Mark acknowledged then that there had been screams coming distantly from somewhere in the dilapidated, once elegant row of tall terrace houses of Mornington Crescent itself. Almost continuous screams. He had heard them, but he had thrust the sound aside as being a warning of danger which now that Brian Parkinson was with them could be disregarded.

'Think I'll just have a dekko.'

He wanted for an instant to tell him not to go. People screamed – this sounded like a child now that he was listening to it – because they were being hurt or were afraid and that meant that there was someone hurting them or putting fear into them. So, almost always he had contrived not to hear, or to find reasons why he should do nothing, or, as he had done when he had seen Dr Satpathi attacked by the window-cleaner, reasons why he should delay. There had been many, many people like him and he had got into the way of it. But now Brian Parkinson was simply going straight to investigate.

He swung round and hurried after the swiftly striding battle-bloused figure. Dr Satpathi trotted along in the rear.

The screaming, which scarcely once slackened, appeared to be coming from the third house along in the broken-down crescent. The place no longer had a front door and showed every sign of having been long deserted.

Brian Parkinson simply went up its cracked front steps and entered. Mark thought he was taking deplorably few precautions, but he went in behind him.

The whole house smelt so strongly of decaying matter that it almost made him cough. The floorboards of the narrow hallway were almost all missing so that it was

necessary to stride rapidly from joist to joist. A short flight of stairs, their banisters all jagged stumps, led down to the back where there was a glimpse of daylight. The screams were coming from somewhere just beyond.

Brian Parkinson went down at a rapid trot, to all appearances careless of what or who he might find, except that he loosened a little the pistol at the end of its lanyard in his belt.

Another doorless doorway led out to the back. Brian Parkinson went straight through. Mark followed.

It was at once clear what the cause of the screaming was. A girl of perhaps nine or ten in a dirty pinkish smock of a dress, hair matted, face streaming with snot, was standing, mouth open to its fullest stretch, up against the high back wall of the yard. And snarling and snapping at her arms, one of which was already bloodily torn open, was a large dog, emaciated and mangy, something like an Airedale.

Brian Parkinson plunged forward, swinging up his cricket-bat club. It descended to the dog's head. There was a wet crack. The animal fell to the ground, its body jerking.

'You get a lot of dogs like that,' Brian Parkinson said cheerfully. 'Hunger crazed, you know.'

It was Dr Satpathi who managed to calm the girl enough to find out where she came from. His wheedling story-telling voice, though he told her no story, worked more quickly than Mark could have imagined possible. And in less than ten minutes the three of them were escorting the child round to the house where she had said her mother was.

When they had left her Brian Parkinson carefully wiped the lead sheathing of his bat on a tussock of grass growing between two paving stones.

'Should have used the pistol,' he said, 'only I haven't got all that much ammo.'

He made no other comment, and soon he was leading them once more, at his familiar testing pace, along

Hampstead Road on their route south. Yet Mark found he was not altogether happy. The crusader-soldier's rescue operation had been justified a hundred times over, and it had delayed his own journey by little more than twenty minutes. But what if there were other sounds and sights that distracted him, less worthy ones? After all, the fellow had gone out of his way to do no more than play a joke on him himself. How many other trivialities would he have after?

But at least they were covering the ground now. His legs had begun to ache with a little painful dart at the side of the thigh at every pace. Would he have to ask to go more slowly? He looked at Dr Satpathi beside him. He too was obviously finding the going tough. But his face, for all that it glistened with perspiration, was stamped with a look of almost comic determination. Well, if he could keep it up ...

Ahead now the old Post Office Tower had become visible on the skyline, all in a single shade of deep grey in the mistiness, a gaunt skeleton leaning a little out of true. Beside it against the sky, though in fact nearer to them, was the tall block of the Euston Tower office building, much of its green glass still intact in the upper ten or more floors. Directly to their right, as they walked, the long-fronted ugly creamish coloured building that had been a local government beehive loomed emptily. Across a whole section of it at some stage someone had painted in huge spidery blood-red capitals 'Cars Kill'. Years of beating rain had not blotted out the shrieked protest, infantile if true.

Their united steps drummed out an irregular tattoo on the potholed road surface, Brian Parkinson's ringing stride, his own flapping walk in his tyre-shod brogues - the stitching was beginning to come undone - and Dr Satpathi's quick trot. Here and there under their feet the white centre line of the road still showed up.

They crossed the flat bridge over the railway tracks coming out of Euston Station in a deep cutting on the left. What was happening there? Was it a vast empty echoing barn? Or a gathering place for refugees, the Kentish Town baths on a bigger scale with hundreds of people huddled here and there under its huge roof? And once long ago trains had departed punctually. Then no longer punctually. And then occasionally.

Ahead now to the right were the long apartment blocks of what had been the Regent's Park Estate, a sprawling council-owned complex built bit by bit in the years after the 1939-45 War. Its buildings looked at this distance to be in a pretty good state of preservation even though this seemed to be one of the areas totally abandoned at the time of the Flight. Certainly, as they got nearer, no one was to be seen in any of the blocks beside the road.

They trudged along past one then another.

Then, suddenly, from what had looked as deserted a block as any a figure ran out of the low entrance archway some thirty or forty yards ahead. There was an abrupt startlingness about the apparition which before they had joined up with Brian Parkinson would have sent him into a state of real fright. It was a young man, beardless or scarcely bearded, or possibly an athletic-looking girl – it was impossible to be sure at the distance – and no sooner had he or she emerged than at the sound of a sharp shout from somewhere high up above he halted as if jerked at the end of a long noose, then turned, and pelted back through the archway into shelter.

Brian Parkinson had stopped and once again had taken up the questing stance that reminded Mark of a hunting animal.

He felt an inward sinking. Was the fellow about to go chasing off once more? It was not so long since the last time and, though that had been justified ten times over, if

he was going to stop in this way every ten or twenty minutes they would not get as far even as crossing the River before darkness fell once more.

‘Don’t much care for that. Think I’ll just have a look-see.’

Of course.

The soldier-crusader moved off at a fast lope towards the arch leading through into the interior of the Estate. Mark looked at Dr Satpathi.

‘I fear we had better go after him,’ the Indian said. ‘Otherwise we are likely to lose him altogether.’

‘Yes.’

Brian Parkinson had stood for a moment just on the far side of the arch, looking sharply from left to right and loosening the pistol at his belt. Then he had moved out of sight. They ran to catch him up.

What had that sharp commanding shout from up above been, Mark asked himself, all at once prey to doubts of every sort. Who was up there? And where exactly were they? On the roof? And why had they shouted in that way?

Brian Parkinson, they saw when they had come through the archway, was running hard across a wide asphalted area on the inner side. It was plain he was in pursuit of something. A moment later he disappeared through a gap between two more of the flats blocks.

Mark glanced at Dr Satpathi and set off with him in the same direction, half hurrying, half hesitating.

‘Stay where you are.’

The order, shouted out, came from behind them. They turned. In the arch two men were standing, dressed in long heavy army-greatcoats, one cradling a carbine, the other with some lighter weapon up to his shoulder. They appeared to have emerged from a narrow door in the side of the low archway.

Then, from the gap between the two blocks through which Brian Parkinson had raced, there came more shouts.

Mark turned to go and see what was happening.

‘Stand still, I said.’

It was the older of the two men in the archway, dark-bearded and sullen-faced, in his fifties, rather portly but plainly not to be laughed at, or disobeyed.

He stood where he was. Behind him he could still hear shouts, clearly angry. One of the voices was a woman’s.

Then there was a silence, and a little later the sound of tramping feet. At last into his view there came first Brian Parkinson, looking distinctly hangdog, pistol and cricket-bat both glaringly missing, then a man holding a pointed shotgun and next two others with between them the person they had seen briefly come out through the archway, now plainly recognisable as a woman, a slight-looking girl of nineteen or twenty. She was struggling a little in her captors’ grip.

Brian Parkinson saw him.

‘Seem to have got into a spot of trouble,’ he called. ‘Silly, but I never actually did have any ammo to make a fight of it.’

Part Five

The portly guard with the carbine seemed to be particularly incensed by Brian Parkinson's cheerful call, cheerful in spite of the gun at his back.

'What are you bringing them here for?' he shouted at the escorting party. 'Get them over to Mr Lillimass. I've been down off the roof long enough. Get them away.'

He turned to go with a heavy swing of his shoulders.

'And take these two as well,' he added. 'I can't accept responsibility. Jack, you'd best go with them. And come back as fast as you like.'

His young companion, who had been standing with his gun pointed at the two of them all the while – Mark saw now that it was only an air-gun, but a pellet in the face was surely something to fear – took a hasty step forward, realised that it was hardly practical to walk with his weapon constantly up at the shoulder, lowered it awkwardly and eventually used it to gesture them in behind the small procession which had shuffled round and was setting off again in the direction from which it had come.

They followed, Mark now speculating about the effect of an air-gun pellet in the back of the neck.

Steadily they marched on a zigzagging route deeper and deeper into the Estate, twisting past the various flats blocks, some long and only two storeys high, others going

up seven or eight floors, each named apparently after different parts of the Lake District, Coniston, Langdale, Hawkshead, Cartmel, Silverdale. What was life like up there now, two hundred miles and more away? Any sentimental links with such parts had long been severed. It might as well be somewhere in forgotten Africa.

With every step they took Mark felt an increasing grey despair. The Estate was a whole isolated labyrinth. How would they ever get out of it? Even if they made a break for it now – and to try would be senseless – it could well take hours of dodging and hiding before they could reach the archway leading out into Hampstead Road again. An hour, two hours, at the very least subtracted from the shrinking ration that remained to Jasmine away in Wimbledon. Why had he been so stupid as to go running after that mad knight-errant with his ammunitionless pistol?

And the deeper they went the more markedly different the whole atmosphere was from the slow broken-down world he had become used to. Everything was tidy. Extraordinarily tidy, strikingly in contrast to anything he had seen since the Second Riots. None of the buildings was damaged, and all of them were noticeably in a decent state of repair, if with awkward-looking patches and areas of differently coloured paint. And each square of garden between the blocks had been cultivated to the full and despite the clamp-down of winter was neat and orderly with dead plants cut down, earth newly turned in crisply dug rows and not a weed in sight. Even the hedges bordering the plots had been trimmed. Only in the first square they had come to had a couple of them been broken, where no doubt Brian Parkinson had been chased or had himself chased after the fleeing girl.

And who was she? And why had she been apparently trying to run away? Why? And why had she been stopped

the moment she had got beyond the boundary of the Estate? And where were they frog-marching her to now?

Each half minute that they went along strengthened his impression of there being, behind the façade of neglect and emptiness, a community here that was a great deal more organised, and much larger, than the little gathering of neighbours up in Highgate that he had thought of as the pattern of the new life. He glimpsed faces peering briefly out of the windows they passed, well-curtained windows and well-fed faces. The guards marching them along, too, looked distinctly different, now he came to think about it, to the Highgate people and those they had seen even as near here as at Mornington Crescent. Their faces were not so pinched, their bodies not so hunched, their beards and hair were better looked after and even their teeth were less yellow. When was the last time he had had toothpaste himself?

But it was a hostile community too. He could have no doubt of that.

And deeper into it they went. Only once had he caught a glimpse, far away down at the end of a straight internal road, of what was presumably the outer boundary. And at the road end, stretching right across from one building to another, there had been a twelve-foot-high barrier of piled-up car bodies.

They turned another corner and came upon a scene of unexpected activity. In a sunken walled playground a game of football was taking place between two teams of boys, one with scraps of red material round their arms, the other with scraps of green. And, young as the players were, the game was being pursued with a purposefulness that, he felt, he had not seen devoted to anything, game or business, for many many long months.

The referee's whistle blew in sharp blasts in the cold air.

As they tramped past – was he right in thinking the pitch was actually rather too small? – he saw that at the far end there was even a little crowd of spectators, younger children than the players, with watching over them two mothers hugging themselves in the chill. He wondered why the two of them were there. Surely with high barricades at every access road and with guards on the roof above the entrance archway there was no need to look after children like that?

‘Billy, pay attention or you’ll get a smack.’

The voice rang out to him above the clatter of running feet on the asphalt and the referee’s whistle blasts. It sounded brightly cheery. But it added suddenly to his feeling of pervading unease.

Then, round yet another corner, they came at last to what was evidently their destination, a large single-storeyed building with a board outside saying ‘Tenants Commonroom’ and another great-coated guard standing at the entrance swinging a long smooth yellowish wooden club from a strap round his wrist. They came to a straggly halt in front of him.

‘Intruders,’ the leader of their procession explained. ‘Caught trying to effect entry.’

Mark felt a jab of resentment. All right, so they had been ‘effecting entry’, but what of it? Why were they being marched here because of that?

And what was going to happen to them?

And how long would they be kept here?

The guard with the long club nodded them inside.

They came, through two sets of double-doors, into a very large room which at once reminded Mark a little of one of the self-confident London clubs of old, read about in novels once. It was dotted with groups of armchairs in some of which a number of old people sat crouchingly, a few playing desultory games of drafts or dominoes, others snoozing in

the warmth from the two big fires at either end, crackling and cheerful, burning what looked like chunks of the joists of wrecked houses. But the chairs were arranged with a great deal more regimentation than in any club, all in groups of three, shoulder to shoulder, with a small table symmetrically in front like so many unmoving drum-majors each leading a silent puffing blowing band. And, prominent above the nearer fireplace, was a large painted board with the word 'Rules' at its head.

But there was no time to read it. The young man with the air-gun pressed him sharply forward and the whole small procession of them went clattering up the length of the room to where, in front of the far fireplace, there was a flat desk with a small red-faced man of about sixty sitting behind it. He was remarkable in that he was as clean-shaven as Brian Parkinson, but, more, his hair had been trimmed with immense precision and slicked back with grease in a style dating right back to the fifties.

He was busy ticking off items in a long list, dipping each time an ancient fountain-pen into a bottle of pallid home-made ink. And he continued with this task, without making any move to look up, long after they had come to a noisy halt in front of the desk.

Paperwork, Mark thought. How it sprang up. Even the preacher at the Baths had had his scrap of paper to read out the next day's tasks from. Perhaps man had been doomed solely by being a paperwork-creating animal, and only with the wrenching away of the whole super-structure of civilisation in ruined London had the activity withered at last into nothingness. Here once more to spring up again, an ineradicable weed.

The leader of the escort gave a loud cough. But still the man with the slicked-down hair – it must be the Mr Lillimass they had been sent to – went on dipping his pen in the pale ink and making his precise little ticks.

‘Hello, old boy.’

It was Brian Parkinson.

‘Silence in the ranks,’ bellowed the guard behind him.

He subsided, although from the sound of his compressed breathing it was plain he would not be able to stop himself talking for long.

But, before he quite broke out again, Mr Lillimass abruptly looked up.

‘Well, well, and what’s all this then?’

‘Prisoners, Mr Lillimass. Attempting to effect entry.’

The leader of their party seemed absolutely unable to get away from his set phrase.

‘Very good. Very good. They’ll have to be dealt with in due – ‘

He stopped short and slowly rose from his chair. It was indeed a small man, scarcely five foot six.

He stood still for a moment, turning his head sideways so as to peer round the burly battle-bloused form of Brian Parkinson at the front.

‘But what do I see here?’ he said at last, in a noticeably over-loud voice.

He came round the desk, taking strides that were a heavy parody of someone creeping up on tiptoe on an unsuspecting prey. Yet, Mark thought with the blood beginning to race in his veins, somehow this is not at all ludicrous.

The pantomimed stalk brought Mr Lillimass finally slap in front of Dr Satpathi.

‘I thought so, I thought so,’ he said. ‘What we have here is a tropical. Nothing short of a bloody tropical.’

He thrust his face, which excitement was making a purplish blue, right up close to Dr Satpathi’s.

‘Well, well,’ he went on, in the same loud voice intended to be listened to in the furthest corners of the big room,

listened to with sniggering. 'So we have tropicals attempting to effect entry now, do we? Tropicals? Well, well, this puts an entirely different complexion on the matter. Entirely different.'

He turned and went hurrying round to the far side of the desk again. There he peered at what Mark realised was a curious relic from the past, a movable desk calendar. It was shabby now, but evidently once, with its gilt finish and elaborate little windows for day, date and month, it had been a toy of considerable cost.

'And tomorrow,' Mr Lillimass pronounced, his examination of the toy completed, 'is Sunday. Sunday for Church parades, for the celebration of duly approved weddings and other miscellaneous religious purposes. The day of rest. A day to be kept holy.'

He jerked suddenly upright, a small rigid figure.

'Very well then,' he snapped. 'Trial will have to be this evening. No doubt about that. It's the Old Folk's film night, but they'll have to miss that for once. We can't wait about when it's going to be a trial.'

'No.'

It was the captive girl. A fiercely angry shout.

Looking at her closely now for the first time, Mark was struck not so much by her appearance – she had dark curly hair and a pleasant prettyish face – but by the air of resilience, of springiness, of spring-likeness that radiated from her. Why he felt it so strongly he found hard to account for. It might have come from the tiny upward tilt of her head, from the glow of her wide brown eyes, from simply the way she carried herself. But it was unmistakable. An upspringing.

At her shout of protest Mr Lillimass had jumped up from his chair as if a blast of steam had operated a piston under him.

‘Not a word out of you,’ he yelled. ‘You’ve caused trouble enough already, my girl. Breaking out of detention, trying to escape. The cells are what you want. The cells.’

‘Listen to me, Mr Lillimass.’ She was speaking with an intent earnestness that was like a true-sounding bell. ‘Listen, you’re not going to do it to this poor man. He came in because of me. And I’m damned if –’

‘Don’t you use language, my girl. No woman’s permitted to use language on this Estate.’

‘I’ll use what language I like. When you and the Rev. between you go taking innocent –’

‘Gag her. Stop her. Shut her up.’

Mr Lillimass’s face had darkened to a bruised blue. The two men on either side of the girl were quick to obey him. One clamped his hand across her mouth and the pair of them lifted her clean off her feet.

‘Take her away,’ Mr Lillimass shouted. ‘Get her into the cells. And you can take this lot with you.’

‘Look here,’ Brian Parkinson said loudly. ‘You can’t –’

But the man with the gun at his back jabbed him hard and he subsided.

In seconds they had been wheeled round and were marching back down the length of the big room, the two men carrying the girl, her long legs flailing, leading the way. The last thing Mark saw was Mr Lillimass heading determinedly towards a large blackboard that stood on an easel in a corner with a chalked announcement on it about the Old Folk’s Film Show. It was clear that instead he would write up that tonight there would be a trial.

A trial? They were to be kept locked up and then tried? It was monstrous. Monstrous. How would he get to Wimbledon now in the time remaining to him?

And what did these people think they were doing in any case? What set of laws had they invented, now that all law had been floodswept away, so as to need trials for

transgressors? Had the very recklessness outside made them eager in this walled domain they had built to embrace some extraordinary imposed code in all its severities?

And the girl, the upspringing creature? 'Detention'? Was that some sort of punishment she had been awarded in the past? But for what crime? And why had it been on behalf of Dr Satpathi in particular that she had burst out the way she had done? And why had Mr Lillimass been so anxious then to have her silenced?

Then another thing, who was - was it? - the Rev? Someone, the girl had said, who went about taking the innocent. And what? Doing what to them? She had been gagged before she could say.

They came to a halt at a low windowless single-storey brick-built structure. The young man with the airgun was told to open its solid door. It was fastened by a pair of long external bolts grimed with rust and he had some difficulty in pulling them back.

Mark saw that a little way along there was a dingy board fixed to the wall, its lettering almost obliterated. He made an effort to piece it out and eventually got it. 'Solid Fuel Store.'

Brian Parkinson was shifting noisily from foot to foot. Was he contemplating making a break for it? Mark took a surreptitious look at Dr Satpathi. But he was standing gazing down at his shoes, apparently resigned to whatever was happening to him. The young man working on the bolts at last wriggled the lower one free and heaved the door wide to reveal a pitch-black interior.

'Get in,' the escort leader said, giving Brian Parkinson a sharp shove with his shotgun.

He stumbled forward. A chance gone. But the barest of chances. And now nothing for it but to go meekly in after him.

As soon as Dr Satpathi in his turn had shuffled inside, the door behind them was banged to without the girl being pushed in to join them. They heard the heavy bolts being twisted and forced into their sockets. The darkness seemed complete.

‘Well,’ Brian Parkinson said at once, ‘we’ll have to set about getting ourselves out of this little lot.’

Mark felt too dispirited even to point out that it had been him who had got them into it. The smell of the fuel that had once been kept in the store struck his nostrils like sour leather.

‘Look,’ the mock soldier’s voice came again almost at once. ‘There’s a tiny bit of daylight over there. I’m going to find out where it comes from.’

Idiot.

‘Dr Satpathi,’ he asked, in an oblique rebuke, ‘are you all right?’

‘Yes. Or to an extent at least. I have found a wall and I have sat myself down against it. But it is somewhat damp.’

‘I’ll come over if I can,’ he answered.

But before he had set out to grope his way across Brian Parkinson’s cheerful voice came again.

‘Ah ha. Seems to be a bit of a gap in the wall between us and what must be the other half of the building.’

He listened to him blundering about.

‘Yes, here we— Quiet, you two.’

Damn fool.

‘Is that you, my dear? Yes. Yes, it’s us. Are you all right?’ He could not hear the reply. Apparently the girl felt it important to keep her voice down. He stayed still while a longish whispered conversation took place.

At last Brian Parkinson turned away from her.

‘Yes, well,’ he said, speaking a lot more quietly and sounding, too, considerably less confident. ‘Yes. Look,

things are a bit dicey actually.'

Mark's eyes had begun to get used to the dark and in the faint bar of light coming through the gap in the dividing wall he could now just make out the bulky shape of Brian Parkinson's battle blouse.

But why was the fellow not getting on with it?

'Look, the fact is that the people here don't care for intruders much, and— Well, they're red hot against— Well, tropicals. I mean, the fact is that they— Or, look, the girl here - her name's Penny by the way, Penny— Well, she says that she's pretty well sure that our friends will want - will want to shoot Dr - er - Whatshisname.'

'To shoot?' Mark asked, all his vague rage over what had happened to them uniting in an instant into one excoriating rocket of fury. 'You mean, to kill him? Kill him for being what they're pleased to call a tropical? And just because we came into their precious Estate?'

'That seems to be it, old boy. They're apparently likely at this trial affair to sentence the pair of us to what they call the Bikes. That's driving a whole lot of bicycles they have harnessed to their generators. But, if what Penny says is true, they'll condemn our friend here to - er - death. She says they've shot people before.'

He fell silent.

Mark too felt, after his first rush of incredulous anger, incapable of any other reaction. What he had heard was simply too horrifying.

He tried to imagine what Dr Satpathi must be feeling. There had been no sound from down on the floor. What must he be thinking? What possible response was there for him to have?

'Dr Satpathi?'

He managed to bring out the words.

'Yes? Well, yes, my dear friend. It is most unfortunate.'

Guided by the voice, he made his way across to where the little Indian was sitting and slithered down the wall till he was squatting beside him. He had been right: it was damp.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘it may not be true. I mean, what do we know about this girl, Penny? She may be some sort of a hysteric. Anything. Or they may not go so far this time. I mean, all we did was to ...’

He gave up. What he had said about the girl was not, he knew, true. And Dr Satpathi would know it as well as he did. In any case words were useless.

Nor did Dr Satpathi seem to need them. He had taken the news with extraordinary quietness, in enormous contrast with his shrieks and pleas for mercy at the hands of the hulking window-cleaner. But perhaps, as he had indicated himself, he was terrified of pain but not death.

‘Look,’ Brian Parkinson said, with what seemed appalling loudness.

Then he dropped his voice to a burring urgent murmur.

‘We’ve just got to get out of here fast. And we can do it. The place isn’t so jolly well built that we can’t make a hole in it with a bit of effort. The wall between us and Penny’s only one layer thick and on her side there’s some ventilation holes which ought to give us a good start. So, if we all four work hard as we can go, we’ll be out before they come for us.’

‘Yes,’ Mark said.

But he did not believe the wildcat notion. The place would not be used as a prison if you could simply take the bricks from the walls and get out.

But Brian Parkinson was already over at the gap between the two cells and whispering hard to Penny. And it seemed that she was agreeing to help.

What was the use though? They were intended to be kept shut up, and they would be kept shut up. Jasmine would be

dead long before he got anywhere near Wimbledon. And Dr Satpathi would be shot. For nothing. For having a black skin that wasn't even black they would kill him.

He realised that, beside him on the dank floor, the Indian had been quietly talking. He paid attention.

'... now while times were bad this did not have much importance since all his energies were devoted to the mere problem of keeping going, during the *jal-kal*, the greatly dreaded scarcity of water, and worse during the *trin-kal*, the failure of animal fodder, in a year when as they say in Rajasthan there had been rain enough only to wet one horn of the cow.'

It was another story. But why at this of all times? To sit and drool out ... Had his mind gone?

But no. No, he saw it in an instant. It must be his only way of dealing with the appalling situation he had been faced with. To transpose it. To find from his store of myth and legend some equivalent which would show him a way of coming to terms with the too brutal fact.

He began to listen with as sharp concentration as if he was hearing a master plan of escape.

... times improved. The next year was good for Ramdeo, and the years that followed even better. Stage by stage he moved from his first wretched hovel into at last a mansion of moderate grandeur. But now his wife, who had patiently endured the bad times, began to feel she deserved a measure of ease and asked him to purchase a horse and carriage. Ramdeo, who thought walking was in any case a pleasant activity, agreed only with reluctance. But his wife was delighted even with unwilling acquiescence. "I shall go for a daily ride," she said, "and I shall take my mother." Now this, as is often the way, proved to be the sticking-point for the good Ramdeo's tendency to unreasonableness which I have already told of. He promptly forbade the presence of his mother-in-law. His wife insisted. A bitter

quarrel ensued. At last Ramdeo seized a stick. "If you continue to defy," he shouted, "I will whip the skin off your back." The foolish woman nevertheless persisted. Ramdeo struck her, and indeed would perhaps have killed her had not a neighbour intervened. This good fellow, when all was calm again, inquired the cause of the dispute. When he had heard it he said to Ramdeo, with as stern a visage as he could muster - '

But here the tale was sharply interrupted.

'Look,' Brian Parkinson said, 'will you take over here? I'm exhausted already and so's Penny. It's hellish slow work, and we're going to have to keep at it like buggery if we're to do it in time.'

Mark scrambled to his feet. He very much wanted to hear the story to its end. He had been beginning to think he could see why Dr Satpathi had chosen it. It seemed to be saying something, vaguely to be discerned as yet, about the times they were living in and about what could happen if they got better. And the farmer, Ramdeo, with his tendency to unreasonableness, were there not people all too like him waiting for them outside? Would the story eventually put them somehow into their place in the scheme of things? But to sit and listen apparently to a childish tale when Brian Parkinson was working himself to exhaustion to get them out of their terrible situation was not possible. Even if his scheme was thoroughly crackbrained.

If there was the least chance of escaping he must do all he could to take it. He owed that to Jasmine.

He made his way over to the gap between the two cells, Dr Satpathi accompanying him with a hand on his arm.

Brian Parkinson had been working with his belt buckle on the mortar round one of the topmost bricks in the wall. He had succeeded in making a deep slit-like hole but the brick was still firmly in its place.

‘Have you got anything else to work with?’ he asked Mark when he had shown him what he had done.

Mark wondered whether to offer to break the bottle of Pernod, still heavy in his coat pocket. A shard of its thick glass might make an effective tool. But what rebuke would Mrs Brillington find for him if he arrived there empty-handed? If he ever did arrive there.

But he was rescued from his dilemma by Dr Satpathi.

‘I have a small penknife,’ he said. ‘Luckily I am accustomed to keep it in my jacket pocket so the fellow at Archway did not make away with it.’

Together they set to work. Within two or three minutes Mark found the muscles of his forearm had begun to feel achingly tired. But he forced himself not to slacken and in grim silence they worked on and on.

They ended their first spell when the brick they had been tackling at last came free. The work had left him with a sensation of pulling fatigue that stretched right down to his thighs, and Dr Satpathi, as soon as Brian Parkinson said he would take another spell, simply slid down against the wall beside them and seemed at once to fall asleep.

On through the morning they worked in alternate spells, sharing in their rest periods the dry stick-loaf Mark had cooked over his dully smoking fire before he had had any idea of the journey awaiting him – it seemed as if it had been weeks ago – as well as the contents of Brian Parkinson’s large water flask and his own smaller plastic one. According to Penny they would not be given any food by their captors. People in the cells got only one meal, last thing at night.

At intervals, as they gradually widened the gap between the cells, Mark learnt a little about Penny and about the Estate. It seemed her family had been tenants of a flat in one of the blocks even before the Riots. She herself had been still a small child when Mr Lillimass – Mr Litmus she

called him because, she said, his face turned from red to blue when he got angry – who was also a tenant and had been a commissionaire at a West End cinema until it had been taken over to show sex films, had started to organise a vigilante group. As times had grown worse this had developed into a force that had eventually fortified the Estate and cut them all off.

‘And it was about then that the Rev came.’

‘The Rev?’

‘That’s what we call him. The Reverend. I think he was a proper clergyman, but I’m not sure. Anyhow, he was always on about prostitutes and perverts and tropicals. Lumped them all together. And there was one West Indian bloke here, big tough feller, who wouldn’t go when all the others were chased out. He had him tried and shot in the end. That’s why –’

She broke off as she realised that Dr Satpathi was near enough to hear.

It was not until later, some time in the afternoon when they had begun the much more difficult task of making the small grid of inch-wide ventilation holes in the back of Penny’s cell into something big enough to scramble through, that he heard how Penny herself had come into the trouble which had brought them all to where they were.

Soon after the Rev had been made head of the Estate community, it seemed, he had instituted the Rules under which they all now lived. And among them was one which said if any boy wanted to go out with a girl he had to make a formal application. If a couple were seen holding hands, much less kissing, without this permission the boy would be sentenced to so many gruelling hours ‘on the Bikes’, presided over by guards with whips, and the girl to detention and floor-scrubbing, soap-making and other tasks. Old Litmus’s son, Peter, no less, had applied to court Penny, but she, instead of waiting a month and then asking

to have the permission annulled as the rules said she must, had refused to have anything to do with him.

‘And once you get on the wrong side of ‘em you can’t never get back. So in the end, just this morning, I decided I’d had enough. Only I suppose I should have planned it more.’

‘Could you have got away if you had?’

‘Yeah, I think so. I know I could.’

She spoke with clear fire.

By now there was room enough for all four of them to work at the same time, and there was light enough coming in for Brian Parkinson to read his watch. But it had not been cheerful news when he had first done so. It was plain that they would be very lucky to have a hole big enough to squeeze through before six in the evening, the time Penny had said trials and similar events always took place, after the Estate’s working day was over.

And that was providing Brian Parkinson’s elaborate watch was approximately right. Clocks on the Estate, Penny said, had been carefully kept going and checked against each other ever since the days when there had been radio time-signals.

As it was, they failed to make it by a wide margin.

The hole was still a great deal too small even to push little Dr Satpathi through when, from the opposite side of the store, they heard sharp shouts of command. They crouched, shocked into stillness, and listened. In a few moments it became all too clear that an escort party was being formed up for them.

‘Quick, back through,’ Brian Parkinson snapped.

The three of them scrambled into their original cell and hastily piled back the bricks they had so laboriously removed.

‘I’ll swear it’s not nowhere near six,’ Brian Parkinson repeatedly muttered. ‘It’s still daylight. How can it be?’

Then the tight bolts outside were squealingly pulled back. They ran across and formed up close to the door so that their escape route was as much hidden as possible. The door swung open. Mr Lillimass was there at the head of the escort.

‘Hurry along, if you please,’ he sang out. ‘Trial’s to begin at 4 p.m. sharp. The Rev says the old folk are not to miss their treat for the likes of you. Come along there, come along.’

They were shoved into a small group surrounded by the escort. Mr Lillimass pushed home one of the bolts of the door and gave the order to march.

At least, Mark thought, the escape route is intact. Perhaps when the trial was over they would be able to use it. Get away before any sentence on Dr Satpathi was carried out. And if they had escaped by, say, six in the evening then he would still have a clear eighteen hours to get to Wimbledon. Time enough, easily.

But what about the trial? Would they get a chance to present a case? After all, on any reasonable view they were simply not guilty of any offence since there had been no warning signs around the Estate. They ought to be released, with apologies.

Yet Penny had been in no doubt at all that Dr Satpathi was going to be shot.

‘Tell me the rest of that story of yours,’ he said to him with sudden urgency.

The little Indian turned with eyes shining. Yes, it was true: he had seen his story as something worth saying aloud, even in the terrible circumstances he was in. A legacy.

‘Well, the tale is not much longer in the telling.’

His voice was very hard to hear. Mark walked alongside him, leaning over to catch the words.

‘Ramdeo’s neighbour, you remember, had prevented him beating his wife to death and had inquired the cause of the

quarrel. Now he assumed as stern an expression as he could muster and addressed Ramdeo thus: "So it was your horse that nipped off all my young corn. I shall go to the courts against you *instanter*" Ramdeo, of course, replied that he had no horse. "If you have no horse," the neighbour answered, "what is it you harness to your carriage?" They were being hustled along towards the Tenants Commonroom as if they were already late. 'Ramdeo again replied that he had no carriage. "Then tell me this," the astute neighbour said, "if a carriage you have not got nearly resulted in the unfortunate death of your wife, why cannot a horse you have not got be responsible for the damage to my corn?" And with that poor Ramdeo at last learnt his lesson.'

Dr Satpathi gave him a brief deprecating smile, white teeth gleaming.

And, Mark thought, with a sudden gold-glow of admiration, the almost condemned man had not hesitated by so much as half a breath when he had come to the words 'nearly resulted in the unfortunate death'. Not by a quarter breath.

Part Six

Hardly had Dr Satpathi finished telling the story of Ramdeo, the unreasonable farmer, than they were being jostled through the two sets of the Commonroom's double doors again. The big room looked very different from the dingy club-like place of the morning. It was packed to bursting with people sitting on jammed rows of chairs with only a narrow aisle left running up the centre and a clear space at the far end where Mr Lillimass's desk was.

The three of them were marched up the length of the room – Mark felt every eye in the place bearing on him as if he were being softly prodded by the scores of jelly-like orbs – and ordered to stand in front of three sagging grey canvas stackable chairs that had been placed facing the desk, draped now with a grey blanket on which there rested a water carafe topped by a reversed tumbler and an ornately turned gavel, still-life clear.

Mark stood steadily contemplating the two objects, not daring to look at the buzzing, murmuring mass of hungry spectators. But he was nerve-pluckingly aware of them. Of their odour. Compressed bodies, sweating with illicit pleasure. A damp tangy miasma.

He did not however have to endure it long.

'Order in court. Be upstanding.'

Mr Lillimass was using his lungs to the full, as perhaps he had done in the days long past to attract sluggish patrons into the cinema outside which he had paraded.

It would be the Rev arriving.

Mark had pledged himself not to turn and look when he came in. But he was able to hold to his promise for only a second or two. The effect of mass attention being transferred at a stroke from himself and his two fellow prisoners to the person who had just entered was almost physical and he could not stop himself following the monster swing of the magnetic needle.

The Rev, coming striding up the narrow aisle in the centre of the big room, was tall, probably an inch or more over six feet, and the striking effect of his height was sharply accentuated by the fact that he was almost completely bald. Only a fringe of black hair, a little long and untidy, grew at the back of the high gleaming skull that looked, as he headed swiftly towards them, like a tall polished ivory helmet. Beneath it was a long face, cleanshaven to glistening point, with a prominent prow-like jaw and a pair of light grey eyes darting almost feverishly from side to side.

He reached the blanket-covered desk, went round behind it, stood for a moment looking at the three of them – Mark brought up his gaze to face him, but only with an immense effort – and then sat down and cleared his throat so loudly and deliberately that he might have been issuing a statement.

‘Be seated. Court is in session.’

Mr Lillimass’s shout was followed by a prolonged, gradually dying clatter as the spectators took their seats again. Mark felt himself tapped on the shoulder by the guard standing behind his chair and subsided into it. In front of him the Rev waited in distant silence till every last sound had ceased. Then he gave another of his deliberate

high-pitched throat clearings that seemed to say as much as a whole sentence.

‘My friends.’

The bright grey eyes flickered across the dense packed rows of onlookers.

‘We are here today to see justice done. Here at least, in this community of ours, we have freed ourselves from the terrible errors that brought chaos, no less, to the world that we once knew. Here at least we recognise truth, and we bow down before it. Here we put justice in her proper place, high and holy above the crawling considerations of the weak who did not dare to mete out due punishment from craven fear that they in their turn might have punishment meted out to them. My friends, you will not here today have to endure hearing a squirming mess of psychiatrists telling you that the wicked are not wicked. You will not have to hear a paid and vile lawyer pretend that a wrong committed has not even taken place. Here you will see justice done. Pure justice. And simple justice.’

The pale eyes under the ivory skull helmet came back to look at each one of them in turn.

‘It is because we are here to see justice done,’ the high clear voice went on, ‘that I have ordered this trial to take place before the end of our usual working day. I will not tolerate those who are aged among us losing one of the pleasures of their declining years just for the sake of a pack of wild and evil men. And, since it is proper also that any sentence be carried out with the least possible delay, I have directed that the trial should start early enough to be completed before daylight fails.’

And with those last three words, spoken with even extra emphasis, he turned again to the eager spectators. To be rewarded with a long ‘Aah’ of satisfaction.

Mark knew at once why it had come. A verdict that needed daylight in order to be carried out meant beyond

doubt a sentence of death by shooting. Penny had said that this was what they would do, and that gasp of pleasure from the onlookers confirmed it.

This was not a trial at all. It was a ritual conviction ceremony, a gathering for the purpose of killing Dr Satpathi. Of killing him and first glorying in it.

He found the idea impossible to comprehend.

‘Mr Lillimass,’ the Rev called out in his high-pitched voice. ‘Would you give us the charges?’

Mr Lillimass, who had taken a seat reserved for him in the front rank, bounced to his feet and stood at fierce attention, face under the slicked-down neat grey hair visibly going from heated crimson to bluey purple. Mr Litmus.

He produced from his pocket a sheet of paper – more paper – and, taking a deep gulp of breath, read in a noisy drone.

‘In the case of the first two accused: that they did intrude upon and despoil the true peace of the inhabitants of the Regent’s Park Estate without lawful cause. In the case of the third accused: that he did intrude upon and despoil the said peace, being not a freeborn subject of His Majesty.’

Again from the spectators came a single indrawn hiss of hate-filled satisfaction.

Mark found himself doubting his ears. That these people should accuse them without even bothering to find out their names, as if they were so much punishment fodder, two white and therefore automatically ‘true born subjects of His Majesty’ and one brown-skinned and therefore as automatically faced with a death sentence. And ‘His Majesty’? Were they really invoking the King of England as some fantastic justification for their loosed hatred? The King, wherever he was now. In Australia or somewhere when he had last heard. Did they believe the King’s writ still ran in the ruleless world outside? No, of course, they did not. All they wanted was that ring of officialdom, a pretence

that a whole locked and interlinked system of laws still rose above them.

Let them have their pretences. There was nothing to be done now. They were going to kill poor harmless Dr Satpathi as soon as they had finished here. They were in all probability going to make Brian Parkinson and himself into galley-slaves on their damned bikes. Or ... Or were they too going to be sentenced to death? No. No.

What had he kept himself alive for in all these last years when just keeping alive had been almost too much for him? To be shot to give these people their nasty pleasure? No. No. No.

Rage shifted and stirred down in the bottom of his mind.

In front of him the Rev cleared his throat again. The high pellucid sound.

‘Very good. Now we shall need a witness. Is there someone?’

‘Yes, please, sir.’

It was the portly man who had so resented having to come down from the rooftop when they had been captured. Without his long greatcoat he had not recognised him sitting in the front row.

‘Very well. Just tell us in your own words what you saw.’

‘I was on duty at the arch leading out to Hampstead Road, your reverence. I saw these people making their way along the road, though from where I was up on the roof I couldn’t see that one of them was a trop. Otherwise I might have put a round into him.’

‘Quite so, quite so. Go on, though.’

‘Well. Then, for no reason at all so far’s I could see, they all three of ‘em turned and made a dash in under the arch.’

The damned liar. Not a word about Penny nearly escaping. Wants to keep his nose clean, of course.

Rage jerked about in his mind. But the Rev was speaking again.

‘Yes. We have heard quite enough. They wilfully made their way in. The case is proved.’

The pale eyes under the ivory dome of the helmet skull brightened. He was about to pass sentence.

Mark turned his head away. To look anywhere. Anywhere rather than take even a passive part in this nastiness. His gaze hit on the big double-columned board of rules. He forced himself to read them, to blot out the sound of the farce.

1 Tenants are not to leave the bounds of the Estate except in regular working parties under supervision.

2 Lights Out is at 8 p.m. in Winter and 10 p.m. in Summer. Tenants are forbidden to leave their flats after these times.

3 Male Tenants and Female Tenants above the age of -

But he could not keep out the sound of that high-pitched perfectly clear voice allocating to him his fate.

‘... guilty of an altogether unwarranted crime, and I have no hesitation in sentencing you both to two months hard labour, at the end of which time you will be given the alternatives of either joining this community and learning to live decent lives or of expulsion.’

So he was not to be shot. But it was to be imprisonment here, for two whole months. And Jasmine would die tomorrow. At round about noon, or a little later if Tommy’s expensive potion was more effective than he had guaranteed. And Dr Satpathi was going to be condemned equally, but to die, as surely as if the final ravages of cancer were eating at this instant his inmost flesh.

Not to hear that sentence pronounced.

He flung himself round to the board of ridiculous rules and started to read them again with all the force of concentration he could summon up.

6 Female Tenants and Kiddies under the age of 12 are forbidden to use offensive language of any kind.

7 No spiritous liquor is to be manufactured or drunk. Beer will be provided when available for Male Tenants over the age of 21.

8 All Boys over five years are to take part in daily sport, except on Sundays.

9 Every Male Tenant is entitled to one week's holiday per year, that holiday to be taken upon the premises.

... to be shot.'

These words had penetrated, as he had known they would.

The swirling rage burst tumultuously out.

'No!'

A breath-wrenching jerk across his neck made him aware that, without being conscious at all of doing anything, he had leapt forward three-quarters of the way across the gap to the ivory-helmet figure of the Rev behind the desk, hands seeking a throat. But he had been stopped. A lunging grasp at his collar from behind had brought him up short. And now in front he saw two long rows of buttons glinting down a khaki greatcoat, a face contorted with rage or effort and a long smooth pale-coloured club lifted high.

It struck him full across the face.

For two instants he seemed to feel nothing. Then a streak of raw pain ran down from forehead to cheek, to mouth, to chin. And he could sense existence shrinking inwards as the long club rose and descended again and again, each time more dimly apprehended. And the peripheral awareness that Brian Parkinson, too, was engaged in a struggle.

But soon he lost all sense of what was happening until at some later time, perhaps only a few minutes, perhaps longer, he regained his senses somewhere outside to feel brutal hands gripping his upper arms frogmarching him along. The air was healingly cold on his face. Ahead, he realised, the battle-bloused figure of Brian Parkinson was being similarly manhandled. And, as his brain cleared a degree more, he glimpsed yet further in front Dr Satpathi sedately walking between two more tall greatcoated shapes. And almost at the same moment a violent smell of aniseed invaded his nostrils.

For a little, feet dragging and stumbling, shoulders painfully wrenched, he puzzled over this. Could it be some hallucination caused by the beating-up he must have had? But why aniseed? Aniseed?

Then, with the effect of a loose ball neatly dropping into its hole, he knew. Absurd. The Pernod bottle in his coat pocket had been smashed. He could feel now a sticky trickle down his leg and even hear a muffled clinking from the glass.

Jasmine. She would never drink her precious Pernod now. And she would never see him, never say to him the words oncoming death had brought her to want to say, never hear from him the answer she hoped for. Jasmine. Wife, wife, bane of my life.

‘Party, halt.’

A hoarsely shouted order.

He experienced abruptly a feeling of familiarity. He had been here before. But that could not be.

Then: Yes, it could. It was the football area they had been escorted past in the morning, the sunken asphalted playground surrounded by walls five feet deep where the compulsory sport for boys must take place. The little crowd of very young spectators had been assembled just where the party of them were now, and one of the mothers had

threatened cheerfully to smack her child for not paying attention.

He saw that they were leading Dr Satpathi away. They took him down a flight of brick steps that gave access to the asphalt pitch. Mr Lillimass was in charge. And a little further along from them the tall figure of the Rev was standing at the very edge of the wall, a faint waft of breeze in the cold dusky air moving a little the longish lank black hair that fringed his ivory helmet of a skull.

The guards holding him pushed him forwards now so that he too was at the edge of the wall. Where he could get an uninterrupted view. He watched dully as Dr Satpathi – unprotesting – was led across to the far end of the pitch where the white outline of a goal had been painted on the brickwork. When the small party reached the spot some fumbling manoeuvres took place and then the escorts stepped back and it became apparent that Dr Satpathi’s hands had been secured to the wall, to some metal ring or staple.

It was still now but just as cold, and the light was draining away.

‘Listen.’

He half turned at the hissed word. It was Brian Parkinson, who had been pushed up beside him, another privileged spectator.

‘Don’t look at me. Just listen.’

The words were clearly audible, but he did not feel obliged to pay them any attention. Down there they were on the point of blotting out utterly innocent Dr Satpathi and all his store of long-garnered earth-planted tales. In a few moments it would be done. Nothing could stop it. And afterwards the two of them would be taken off and tomorrow when he should be reaching that little pebbledashed house in Wimbledon they would be turning the pedals of bicycles harnessed to heavy generators so

that there could be another film show here, perhaps this time for 'the kiddies'. Why should he listen?

'Listen. We're going to make a break for it. When they're all glued to that. When I shout "Now" you turn and belt like hell after me. Okay?'

He did not answer.

The sheer idiot. They were not going to be allowed just to get away. Any more than anything was going to stop Dr Satpathi being shot.

'Firing squad, take aim.'

Down below, Mr Lillimass was standing to one side, very upright, very much at attention, and the three men of the firing squad, armed with no more than revolvers – but revolvers would be enough – were in position some fifteen feet in front of Dr Satpathi's chained figure. Now they raised their weapons, held double-handed, very carefully to eye level.

He thought he could make out on the lightish bricks behind the small self-contained Indian old dark dried splashes.

'Squad, fire.'

Three shots cracked and reverberated almost simultaneously in the cold dim air. Little Dr Satpathi jerked as if a single spasm of electricity had gone through him and keeled straight over.

'Now.'

And at the barked word in his ear, without knowing what he was doing, he simply obeyed the earlier harshly whispered instructions. He swung straight round. He began to run. Nobody made any attempt to stop him. Eyes fastened greedily on that sad keeled-over sack between the painted goalposts, no one was at that moment conscious of anything else.

Ahead, he saw Brian Parkinson's bulky battle-bloused shape racing sturdily into the gloom. He let himself be

drawn after it, matching his stride unwittingly to the pounding steps in front.

He had no idea where they were going. Would Brian Parkinson have remembered their zigzagging route of the morning enough to get them back to the exit arch? Perhaps. He ought to be the sort of person who would.

They ran on. In the slowly closing cold dusk there seemed to be no one to see them. All at the execution, no doubt. There had been a lot of people, dark and massed, on the opposite side, far more even than those crammed in at the trial.

Suddenly he felt an intense jabbing pain in his side. It brought tears to his eyes. He told himself he could not go a step further. But his legs slogged on for him. And then, rounding a corner, there was the courtyard that lay immediately inside the Estate with behind it the archway into Hampstead Road.

They would get out.

'Halt. Who goes there?'

A man appeared at the side of the arch, fifteen yards or so away. He had a shotgun levelled at them at waist height.

Brian Parkinson scarcely wavered. One half-check in his stride and then he was plunging forward straight at the man with the gun.

Mark followed, part wanting to swerve out of the line of fire, part wanting to fling himself to the ground and stay there for ever, part assenting to Brian Parkinson's way.

'Stop. Stop, I'll shoot.'

That was a panic voice. Would they bulldoze the fellow into not pulling that trigger until it was too late?

He found in himself a quarter ounce more energy and caught up a little on the battering battle-smocked figure directly ahead.

And then came the splat of the shotgun. He heard stray pellets scoring the asphalt. And Brian Parkinson tottered.

‘Help. Help. Help.’

The man with the gun was yelling at the top of his voice.

Brian Parkinson was still eight or nine yards away from him. The gun was a double-barrelled one. The second shot could scarcely fail to wound him terribly. From inside the empty building behind more loud voices were coming in answer.

Brian Parkinson wheeled suddenly away.

Mark, a mother-fixated duckling, plunged off after him. They ran into another darkened courtyard. No more shots came, but there were shouts and yelled orders. A third courtyard appeared in front of them, its centre a garden surrounded by neat hedges.

Abruptly Brian Parkinson threw himself over the nearest hedge and flat on to the ground in its shadow. Mark, in his wake, failed to jump high enough and found himself so caught in the thin branches of the hedge, all motivation drained away, that he thought he would simply hang there till he was picked up. But the sheer weight of his body caused him to fall through and end lying in line with and behind Brian Parkinson’s heavily panting form.

Almost at once he heard voices, and though they were questioning and unsure of themselves he locked hard with fear. Out of the edge of his vision, as he kept his face plunged into the frost-hard chunky earth of the hedge bottom, he glimpsed lights. The thin hard beams of torches. He forced himself to stop breathing. But the noise of his heart thudding, of the pounding in his ears, could not be stopped.

He became conscious of the odour of aniseed from the still wet patches on his burberry and trousers. If the searchers happened to come along the path on the other side of the hedge, wouldn’t they smell him out?

‘All clear here. Come along. They won’t get out, whatever they do.’

From the murmur of voices one had sounded clear and authoritative. There came the sound of mingled steps moving away. And then silence.

For a long time he would not allow himself to believe it. But at last he let a short breath escape from his earth-pressed lips.

But he scarcely dared to move even a finger. Time passed. He became increasingly conscious of the pain from the deep bruises all the way down his left side. Occasionally he heard sounds from Brian Parkinson, suppressed moans. And at last after a long while he detected in the distance the noise of people evidently returning to their homes, exchanges of good-nights, a laugh or two. It would be the end of the old folk's film show, he thought. *Lights Out is at 8 p.m. in Winter.* He felt less fear now. It was pretty unlikely that anyone anxious to get indoors would come poking about in the hedge.

A door was unlocked not far away, somewhere on the other angle of the courtyard, and then closed with a slam.

Still Brian Parkinson lay without movement. Keeping equally still, in line with him, he waited. The cold came seeping further and further into him. His face where the first club blow had landed ached with a regular axe-sharp throbbing.

'Should be safe now.'

Brian Parkinson's murmur sent a start of shock through him. It took him some moments to collect up energy enough to reply.

'You're sure?'

'It's been dead quiet for one hour. Can't see my watch, but I've been counting.'

He marvelled at the man's determination.

'Listen,' he was whispering on, 'I've been hit in the leg. It's been bleeding a fair amount and it hurts like hell. I don't

know if I'll be able to get about, but if I can we'll have to find another way out. There's bound to be more than one.'

'Yes,' Mark answered.

But he did not feel that any such ideas really concerned him.

'So this is what we'll do. We'll go and get ourselves a faithful guide. Penny.'

He actually failed to understand at first. Then he realised what the will-driven man lying at his head had proposed: to go back to the very heart of the Estate so as to free Penny from the cell-block and then to go with her probably as far again or further through enemy territory to whatever other way-out there might be. It was mad.

'Look,' he hissed back, 'couldn't we hunt about ourselves and see if we can find somewhere to get out? We can't be very far from Hampstead Road here. Or - or, as you have been wounded, shouldn't we give ourselves up? We'd get more punishment, I suppose, but they wouldn't shoot us.'

'Give in? You can, chum. If you're that spineless. But I'm going to get hold of Penny and get out of this place.'

He began heaving himself upright. There was a single gasp of pain as he put his weight on the leg torn by the shotgun pellets. But he remained standing and in a few moments swung round and blundered away into the darkness.

Mark hurried to catch him up. He felt ashamed, and he felt furious that he was ashamed.

Everywhere seemed deserted in the darkness - thank goodness for the Rev's lights-out rule - and they were able to go at a reasonably good pace. There was no moon but the clouded sky was pale enough for it to be quite easy to find their way, using the outlines of the flats blocks as guides.

And, Mark soon realised, they were back on the route they had taken in that wild run from the execution place. He

once more was flooded with admiration for the man limping and lurching just ahead.

Once, in the far distance, they heard the sound of a small party of marching men. But Brian Parkinson paid it no more attention than a momentary lift of the head.

And then they had the fuel-store prison under their eyes again, a low dark shape against the pale yellow brick of the nearest block. But, against that deeper darkness, a whitish blur stood out at head height and close to the door of Penny's cell. At head height: a head. A guard.

So Penny would not have been able to make her own escape by continuing to work on the hole they had begun to make at the back of her cell. But neither could they get to her now.

Brian Parkinson motioned him back round the corner they had just passed.

'Saw the glint of a gun,' he whispered. 'Have to clobber him.'

'No. It'll be impossible.'

But already he was lurching away, going the other way round the building that sheltered them.

He followed.

'No, go back and watch him from where we were.'

Leaden with the belief that once more their necks were being run into a noose, he stationed himself where he could just make out some thirty yards distant the white blur of the guard's face. Against his own cheeks where he stood close to the wall the bricks were harsh-surfaced as pumice-stone.

Ten full minutes went by. Had Brian Parkinson, heaving and limping, simply fallen down somewhere and lain where he was, unable to move?

But then there was a quick flurry of movement, a single muffled exclamation and the thud of two bodies falling heavily together. And silence again.

He ventured forward, peering into the dark till he was sore-eyed, careless of whether that tiny outbreak of noises had attracted attention elsewhere.

He was still unable to make out what the situation was in the confused huddle down on the ground by the cell door when he heard a blessedly familiar voice.

‘Got him with the old karate chop in the end. But I rather did for my leg.’

And, as he came up, Brian Parkinson pushed himself to his feet using the wall of the cell-block to rest against. Beside him the guard lay still and slumped.

‘Is he dead?’ Mark asked, abruptly and violently not wanting another victim to set beside Dr Satpathi.

‘No,’ Brian Parkinson answered, with a touch of scorn. ‘He won’t be worse than k.o.’d. Look, get Penny out, will you, and talk to her? I’m a bit dazed.’

Mark peered at him. His head was drooping and his injured leg hung uselessly. Would he be able to go on? No point in trying to answer that now.

He turned to the door of Penny’s cell and began wrestling with its bolts.

She was marvellously quick, once he had got the door open, to grasp what was happening and to take in Brian Parkinson’s plan.

‘Super,’ she whispered. ‘And it shouldn’t be too tricky, not with a bit of luck. There’s a wall you can get over. Just along there.’

‘A wall to get over?’

He looked at Brian Parkinson, still leaning where he was and taking no part in their talk.

‘It’s not very high or anything. It’s the way the lads get out when they want a bit of fun over Soho way. Peter Lillimass showed it me.’

‘Well, let’s try. If Brian can make it.’

‘I’ll make it.’

But it looked as if he would not. They had to stand either side of him with his arms over their shoulders and swing him along between them. It was a business that seemed to be terribly noisy. Mark felt his heart thumping as if it was trying to force its way out of his chest and his throat was so dry he had to keep his mouth wide open to get enough air.

Yet everywhere round stayed quiet as if there was no one at all living on the Estate. Nowhere was there a glimmer of light to be seen.

And what Penny had told him about how near the escape place was turned out to be no exaggeration. When she pointed to it, a wall not much more than five feet high at the end of a short alley between two empty blocks with a sprawling coil of barbed wire just visible on top, he felt that after all they might do it. There was such a splendid irony in Penny knowing about the place because Mr Lillimass’s son, whose insistence on courting her had turned her into a rebel, had broken Rule No. 1 *Tenants are not to leave the bounds of the Estate*, that he felt the plan had to work out.

It did.

‘You just lift that wire clear,’ Penny whispered.

They propped Brian Parkinson against a wall and did just that. Penny scrambled up and between them they managed to heave the bulky weight of the crusader soldier up and then over. No sudden dazzling searchlight beam blazed out. No shots came. No shouts.

In not much more than two minutes they were all three standing on the far side. Ahead once more lay the way to Wimbledon. To Jasmine, dying but still within reach.

He took in a great breath of the night air.

Part Seven

The high silhouetted skeleton of the old Post Office Tower – it was not leaning as much out of true as the Tower of Pisa – which they had first seen in the morning not long before Penny had made her attempted break-out was just visible against the clouded sky to their left. Using it as a guide, Mark calculated they must be in a side-street leading down towards the wide east-west running Euston Road. In effect, he reckoned, he had gone off at a wide angle from his previous southward route and was now well to the west of it.

But it would make little difference. To get to Wimbledon and Jasmine – Jasmine lying, of course, of course, in the rather short bed with the flower-painted headboard of her childhood room, a bed on which once in their early days when Mrs Brillington had left to call in on her shop in Kingston they had made rapid and furtive love – to get to Jasmine lying in pain, Jasmine dying, Jasmine still alive buoyed up by Tommy's medicine, the Thames had to be got over somewhere and to reach it crossing Oxford Street then going through Mayfair would be just as good as going more to the east through Soho. Probably it: would be better, he thought. What Penny had said about Peter Lillimass substantiated the rumours he had been brought by a particularly knowing boy, son of Murray Shilton, once owner of a North London chain of saunas, that, even despite the

fighting, nearby Soho had never ceased to be a village of brothels and those displays of intercourse they had called 'voys'.

Yes, there would be a good deal of sense in avoiding an area like that.

But what time was it? Time had got even more lost since that instant when those self-hypnotised killers had put their three reverberating shots into Dr Satpathi. Mild, sudden-sun smiling Dr Satpathi.

It must, by long-ago standards, be evening still. Late evening. A whole procession of dark hours lay ahead. But, yes, moonrise would be around four in the morning, and that should make travelling easier even if it stayed clouded over.

So, make a guess, it must be now about nine or nine-thirty by old clock-time. So till noon tomorrow meant fourteen or fifteen hours for Jasmine. It should be easy enough. Still easy enough.

'Come on. We'd best get well clear.'

It was Penny, plainly elated with tongue-tip tasted freedom.

Together they got their shoulders under Brian Parkinson's arms again and staggered with him down towards the faintly lighter sky over Euston Road. For a minute or two they waited there in a doorway at the corner, looking each way along what once had been the pounding traffic artery, the cars and buses of over-pressured London such a distant memory that it was almost hard to conceive what the deserted, still smooth stretch of tarmac had existed for. But there was no one in sight, just in the distance the outlines of a wrecked car-transporter and one or two other mouldering vehicles, and they humped their burden over towards the far side near what had been Great Portland Street Underground station.

‘Look, we’ll have to rest up,’ Penny said as soon as they reached the far pavement. ‘They won’t ever come looking this far for us, and he’s nearly out, Brian, you can feel it.’

It was true. His weight had grown heavier and deader with every step. There could be no question of going further with him.

He looked round. One of the corrugated sheets hammered over the window of a small shop a little further along had been ripped right away. The place had been a pharmacy, to judge by the battered banner along the top of its façade saying ‘Free Colour Films’, and chemists’ had always been prime targets for looters.

‘Have a look in there,’ he said to Penny. ‘But take care.’

He shifted his stance till he was able to take Brian Parkinson’s full weight and then stood in crouching silence in the chill while Penny made her exploration.

It did not take her long.

‘Dry and empty,’ she reported. ‘We could rest up in it for days.’

‘No.’

She looked at him.

‘I can’t stay,’ he explained. ‘I never got a chance to tell you, but I was on my way to Wimbledon. My wife’s there. She’s – I’m afraid she’s dying. She’ll be dead, I was told, by tomorrow afternoon.’

Penny’s reaction was quick. ‘And you got stuck in the Estate because of me? You might’ve been kept months.’

‘No, not because of you, if we’re to tell the truth. Because of Brian here.’

The deadweight body he was supporting made no protest, though he suspected that the wounded crusader could still hear them.

‘He got me into it,’ he added. ‘Even though it was the same thing in him that got both of us out.’

Then for a considerable time neither of them spoke again, too occupied with manoeuvring that slumped body into the shelter of the wrecked shop and with finding in the thick dark there the most comfortable place they could. But at last it was done.

‘Look, you must go now,’ Penny said.

In the blackness it was impossible to see anything of her.

‘Yes. Yes, I must. You’re sure you’ll be okay?’

‘I can look after myself.’

‘Yes. If anyone can, you can. Well, goodbye. And – and thank you.’

‘I should be thanking you. Free of that place. It was all right for some, fine for them. Safe. My mum and dad liked it, and they’re not evil. But ...’

‘But you couldn’t have stood it, any more than I could have, even if there’d been no question of them shooting Dr Satpathi,’ he said, discovering it as the words came. ‘I’m more like Brian than I thought. You’ll be okay with him? He’s breathing perfectly well.’

‘Yes. Yes, I will. And now, go.’

‘Yes, yes. Well, goodbye.’

‘Goodbye.’

In the dark he groped for her hand, found her arm, pressed it, deriving a spurt of encouragement from the mere feel of the resilient flesh under her jersey, turned and felt his way out into the cold and the dim light.

Penny would be all right. She had the spring in her. But Jasmine would not be all right. In fourteen hours’ time she would be on the point of death.

‘Wife, wife, bane of my life.’

It had been a mutter out loud this time.

From his memories of the streets in the area he decided his quickest course would be to go along Marylebone Road as far as the little crescent at the top of Portland Place and

then go down that till he came to Oxford Circus. It had the advantage of being a route he knew well, or had known. He had walked it often in the old days when walking was unfashionable, visiting the Schools Broadcasting department of the B.B.C. for whom he had once done some writing. Even in this light – there was no sign of a break in the cloud layer – he ought to be able to make reasonably fast progress that way. Fast enough, surely.

But what would be best of all would be a bicycle. A bicycle left carelessly for him to steal.

He smiled. Inhibitions which he had retained in all the years up at Highgate, in that little insulated world inside which he had succeeded in hiding himself, had vanished. He had become resourceful. Like the hare who had discovered in himself enough wiliness to trick the jackal in Dr Satpathi's story.

Sack-slumped dead Dr Satpathi.

Who had left his legacy.

He walked steadily along, keeping his left foot close against the kerb so as not to stray in the darkness.

And soon, just as his foot told him that the turn into the crescent was opening up, he recognised against the sky the magnificent sweep of the tall colonnaded Nash buildings. He remembered them being restored a long time ago, well before the First Riots. Had all that effort been worth it, seen in the light of today's jungle life? And the cost? There had been money to spare then, or so it had seemed. An excess of money, an excess of energy, a creaming of civilisation. But all that had gone. Been eroded and then completely swept away, here at least. Would it ever return? Perhaps it would, with the years. But should it return? That was another question. Hadn't it really been too rich? Too ambitious? Shouldn't cream be mixed into the milk?

He grinned to himself at the neatness of the metaphor. But recognised that neat metaphor-making was a way of

avoiding a proper answer. Perhaps he would find that, when he was less tired, if ever he was less tired.

At least the crescent was intact, so far as he could see. The area supposedly blasted by the rocket and artillery battle in Oxford Street – if that had happened at all – must not have extended this far north.

Perhaps then at some distant day these houses would be properly inhabited again. Not so many grandiloquent headquarters for grandiloquent public and industrial bodies, but proper houses. Perhaps.

He stopped short.

In the dark mass of vegetation that had once been the semicircular, railing-protected garden in the bowl of the crescent something had stirred in the silence. He stood where he was. Listening. It had sounded like an animal, an animal scuffling in the close-matted grass and bushes. A dog? Probably a dog. Or even two or three.

At last, when the sounds appeared completely to have died away, he moved on. But how many halts, trivial halts of this sort, could he afford now? There was still a long way to go. And not a lot of time to spare.

Another two or three minutes of cautious forward movement, slow but not to be improved on, and he located the start of Portland Place at the bottom of the crescent, leading down to Broadcasting House on the left and twisting into Upper Regent Street then, with Oxford Circus only some hundred yards – had it been only a hundred yards? – further on.

He went, careful half-step by careful half-step in the darkness, out into the middle of the roadway, finding that he could now judge his position by the blacker shapes of the tall buildings on either side – one of them further on had been the Chinese Embassy once – and then he set off forwards again, cursing his slowness at every ineffective pace but unable under the cloud canopy to go any faster.

Almost at once he got into trouble. His thrusting right foot encountered a sharp hard edge at shin level and he tumbled straight over. The obstacle had seemed to be about kerb-high, and when he had sat himself up and had had time to feel about he realised that a kerb was exactly what it was. A kerb in the middle of the roadway. There must be some sort of narrow island all down the centre of the wide street. He had forgotten its existence, if he had ever really noticed it in the days when the roadway had been full of cars, taxis and vans.

Then he recalled that, yes, there had been statues in the middle of Portland Place. Three or four spaced out along its length.

He got to his feet again. The fall had made his bruises throb sharply once more. He felt sick too. But no real harm had been done. This time.

He took his bearings again and plunged off, keeping his right foot now close to the kerb of the central island.

At last, after he had paced on for what had seemed an extraordinary length of time, a statue loomed up just ahead. Whose had it been? It was still intact as far as he could see. He peered up at its outline against the dark sky as he creepingly neared it. A large bust on top of a heavy plinth. Some scientist, hadn't it been? Or somebody to do with medicine. Yes. Lister. Lord Lister. Pioneer of antiseptics. Listerine. It had been a germ-killer. Vanished now. And there had been times up at Highgate when any sort of antiseptic would have been a godsend. When he had cut his foot at the beginning of the summer and the wound had not healed for all those weeks, a pus-filled mess. Yes, the age of scientific development was over. Here at least, and everywhere within the farthest range of his knowledge.

Half step, half step, half step. On and on –

And was it? Yes. The second statue. And perhaps there had after all been only three.

Who was this one of? He strained upwards to get it outlined against the sky. Man on a horse. Some sort of plummy helmet. Yes, a field-marshal. Name forgotten. But once famous, statuable. There had been a different world then.

He gave a pat to the solid stone of the long plinth as he passed.

And now, farewell, Field-Marshal, all alone in the dark. Little, cautious, sliding, slow, grit-grating step after step away from you. And others, and others. With each one now the single dull ache into which all his bruises had coalesced seemed to be getting heavier. And the sharp line of pain that had been the blow he had received across the face was jabbing unexpectedly more often than it had before. The chill, too, was edging further and further into him, millimetre by millimetre.

Should he take a short rest till he had more energy? Stop and sit down? Or lie down even till the moon came up and progress at a better rate was possible? Would that be faster in the end? With the burberry wrapped round him he ought to survive five or six hours of exposure.

No, force himself on at least as far as the next statue. Whose was that? Easy. Quintin Hogg, founder of the Polytechnic in Upper Regent Street not far away. He could recall the shape of it fairly well. The bearded – or was it bald? – sage, seated. And a schoolboy or young student on either side, one with a football tucked under his arm. Bit sentimental. But different. And it honoured an educationalist after all. Payment in something better than cans of soapy carrots and messes of unlikely rumours. Yet in a way hadn't those scornful fees been no more than he had deserved? A man who had made a real stand only that one time when he had said 'No more' to Jasmine?

Wife, wife, bane of my life.

Ah, here he was. Quintin Hogg and disciples. Step by step sidle past.

And there to the left should be the looming liner bulk of Broadcasting House. Only – he peered harder as he tramped on – only against the dark sky the big building was no longer linerlike. The whole front section of its top half looked as if it had slid downwards in some huge landslip to lie buckled and broken on top of the lower half. Behind, he could just make out thick interior floors careening forwards as if their descent had been arrested by a vast and time-enduring frost.

Yes, there must have been a long battle at some time for Broadcasting House and its radio facilities, that voice that in the months before had bleated out appeals for everybody to keep indoors, to seek the safety of their cellars. And then whichever lot of them it had been that had won the battle had very soon abandoned the spoils. Too little power available to operate the apparatus? Or the realisation that the time was past when airy opinions any longer affected people? People who had been so opinion-hungry once, opinion-hungry and news-hungry, as if each item that was new might be something that would for a moment satisfy an evergrowing sweet-toothed craving.

But, for whatever reason, at last the silence had set in.

By going well over to the right away from the huge half-ruined building he succeeded in finding a clear path that took him into the short, very broad stretch of Upper Regent Street leading down to Oxford Circus. Yet when at its start he peered at the buildings on either side, once tall anonymous bourgeois commercial blocks with biggish anonymous shops at pavement level, it was plain that they had all suffered considerable damage, especially those on the east. There must be rubble, in great chunks, lying in the roadway ahead. Would it be possible to get past?

He saw himself sprawling, knocked unconscious.

But he must try. If acres of the centre of London were going to be a wrecked battleground it would take hours and hours of painful work to get through. The ration of time he had, still reasonable if he could make steady progress, would be cut to the bone.

He set off, advancing slowly, stopping every two or three yards to strain at the ground in front for hidden obstacles, at times even when it seemed particularly confusing stooping right down and sweeping with extended arms.

It took a terribly long time even to get along the short length to Oxford Circus – it must be much more than the hundred yards or so he had remembered from the time when infected by the rush to be first he had stepped out like a racer among the evening crowds making for the Underground – and for every twenty yards he gained now the amount of debris grew an inch or two thicker. Soon it was no longer possible to find the roadway at all and he had to walk on a layer, frighteningly uneven, of broken bricks and stone in constant fear of tripping on some twisted metal window frame or of having a jagged piece of glass slice into one of his legs.

When at last he looked up to what had formerly been the tall concave-fronted buildings round the Circus itself he saw that they had all been reduced almost to ground level. And he realised that the whole of the circus roadway was piled with huge broken chunks of masonry. A wild moon-surface.

There could be no question of trying to get through. In daylight it would be a hazardous enough scramble. In this darkness it was quite impossible.

He turned round at once. So much time taken away from his total. He must not think of resting now. Go back. Find some way round. That was the only thing to do.

He would go westwards, since the damage had seemed to be worse towards the east. He would go west, if necessary along right as far as Hyde Park, a whole extra

mile and more of half-blind shuffling. But there at least in the park there could not be debris and he could be certain of being able to head towards the River again.

But the journey now looked as if it had become no longer the difficult but perfectly possible walk he had once envisaged but something much more like an explorer's haul over miles of tough terrain.

Yet there proved almost at once still to be pieces of luck. He found the first westwards-leading side-street he could get into was much less choked with debris than Upper Regent Street itself. And when he had fumbled his way along it as far as Cavendish Square he was able to make a little faster progress in the faintly better light of its open space – all its fine old trees, he saw, had been whittled into dead pointed poles by shell blast – and at the far end he noticed that the buildings silhouetted against the sky to his left were more or less intact.

So the battle that had been fought with rockets and artillery for Oxford Street had not extended far along its western half. Oxford Circus might be the jumbled hill of masonry blocks that had stopped him, but, a quarter of a mile or so further along, the street must begin to look much as it had done when it had been a thronged acquisitive scrambling jamboree of shoppers. If now blank and purposeless.

He crossed over to the far side.

And there he recognised the turning leading more or less due south as New Bond Street. As well take that as any other, he thought, though it would be a mistake to follow it too far since it bore away to the east before long – something he had got confused by many a time on foot in the West End: those days seemed like another planet – and if he wanted to cross the Thames by Chelsea Bridge he would need to keep much more to the west. So at some point he would have to turn off to the right, and then – the

idea struck him – he would walk across Green Park. Out in the open he would make some real progress at last.

But it was a great deal darker in the narrow width of Bond Street, that high-fashion shopping mecca that had attracted its pilgrims since the eighteenth century. Perhaps, he thought, there were some of its offerings still in the windows on either side behind smashed glass or careful boarding, things of no value to looting eyes, flimsily floating couture dresses, fashion garments for men, neckties of thick silk, fine porcelain, paintings for the collector, ornate antique furniture, clocks and watches no longer needed for telling the time though perhaps useful still as a little useless gold to barter.

However, by glancing up frequently to the strip of sky above, he was able to keep more or less to the centre of the roadway, though when he looked forwards he was sometimes reduced to putting his hands up in front of his face and feeling his way into the blackness. Even so he tripped on what was probably the edge of a wooden block jutting up from the roadway, falling on all fours, and half a dozen times or more he found he had strayed right over to one kerb or the other. Only, in the scarfing dark the mere difficulty of moving at all at least seemed to put the ache of his bruises and the sick feeling induced by the cold into some limbo where they no longer worried him.

He would place one foot in front of the other, pause a moment, decide he was safe and then repeat the action. It sent him forward. But he guessed that it was at a speed not much greater than ten or twelve yards in each minute.

Then suddenly a high kerb that seemed to run illogically at right angles to his path sent him sprawling flat on his face.

He lay full length, deprived by the shock of any ability to get up again. It seemed so unfair. There ought not to have been a kerb there at all if the faintly paler sky above – he

had been looking up at it when he fell – was keeping him in the right line.

But then in a little jet of memory he got it. New Bond Street and Old Bond Street. Where what had been one continuous roadway slightly changed its name they had, years ago, constructed a pavement going right across to divert the jerking and competing traffic into a one-way system.

He felt better the moment he had made the discovery and began pushing himself up again.

His right hand, reaching out, became entangled in what seemed to be a mesh of light ironwork, except that it was not iron-cold to the touch. He found it, when he tried to extricate himself, in fact brittle and breakable.

And in an instant he knew what it was. A skeleton. A body. Someone killed here years before and picked clean by rats or by the kites that had long ago come back in their dozens to the dustheap of the metropolis, circling and wheeling. A wave of ridiculous unreasoning revulsion slid up in him.

He rolled himself away from the thing, scrambled shakily to his feet, gave one glance upwards, saw from the sky that a little way back a side-street opened up – he had missed it earlier: he ought to have taken it – and plunged off towards it, taking long hysterical strides in the blackness, a part of his mind conscious that he had seen worse sights but his will overcome by nerve-jangled panic.

Quite soon in the yet narrower streets of the outskirts of May-fair he lost himself completely. All sense of direction deserted him. He blundered into walls and the spiky remains of iron railings – lengths from these had been favourite weapons in the First Riots – and he tripped persistently over the low worn kerbstones – jumping up again at once as if the bones that had lain so long whitening away on the area of pavement between the two

Bond Streets had sprung to dead life at his touch and were stalking him through the darkness.

At last the tattoo-beating of his heart slowed, and forcing himself to halt and look at the thin strip of sky between the massively tall houses, he was at least able to place himself in the middle of the narrow roadway.

But the roadway of which street? He had no idea.

And time. How much time had he lost by this nonsense? If he failed to sort his way out now, how many more minutes, even hours, would he lose from that small stock?

He made himself walk forward, hoping that by merely going he would eventually recognise somewhere familiar, perhaps Park Lane, or Piccadilly or even Bond Street again. Certainly for all he knew he might well be facing the way he had come and even within a short distance of his starting point. All he could say was that he was somewhere in Mayfair.

Mayfair. The Mayfair once of the socialites, of the opulent.

And it was quiet. Quieter here than it had been anywhere before. The tall houses on either side of the narrow streets seemed to muffle every least noise. They were, so far as he could see, largely intact. The area must have been deserted by its inhabitants well before the Flight proper had got under way, and perhaps because most of the houses had been carefully emptied and well protected looters had done less here than elsewhere. Certainly where buildings were white or light-coloured it was sometimes possible to see that their doors were still in place although windows, where they had not been bricked up, were almost invariably gaping glassless holes.

But, as he made his way along piece by piece, only the shuffle and flap of his own tyre-shod shoes broke the deadened silence.

Then, working his way round yet one more corner hoping for a glimpse of the open space of Green Park or of Hyde

Park, he heard – was it so? – a woman's voice ringing out in distant song.

The sound was so utterly unexpected that at first he almost convinced himself that, for all that it was a rich and lovely soprano and was accompanied by soft piano chords, it must be coming from inside his own head.

The music, he even quickly recognised, was an aria from a Mozart opera. He could not put a name to it. But he had never been good at linking to particular notes Italian words whose meaning he was only half-sure of.

He stood where he was and listened like a desert traveller drinking and drinking at suddenly arrived-at oasis water, all else forgotten. Obliterated.

Mozart. He had heard no Mozart for years. Nor any music, come to that. Music had been one of the lost things. One of the pleasures he had thought would never again exist for him. No doubt here and there people played guitars or sang or perhaps even had record players and power for them. He himself during the past three years and more might have had the energy of spirit to have risen a handful of times into creaking song. But of real music he had heard not a note since very soon after life had contracted for him to that small area of Highgate.

The aria came to a end.

The silence which followed, a small deeper pool in the ocean of silence that was broken only by rare human voices and by the sounds of nature, wind, beating rain, crack or rumble of thunder, seemed even more deadened than it had been before. He felt a sense of desolation, of deprivation, of a snatched-away happiness such as, in the long era of gradually eroded pleasures, he had not experienced for years. The music had gone. Mozart had vanished again.

Mozart.

Tears that had come into his eyes, pricking and stinging, began to trickle down his cheeks and into his beard. The music, after his long absence from it, had affected him with multiplied strength, yet more powerful for its being in particular Mozart. Mozart who had always said to him especially that there is a resolution to the jars and tangles of the world, that at some great and distant end every ill shall be balanced by a good. Balanced and cancelled.

There had been a time, at the start of the black years, when music and poetry too – he had read Shakespeare's sonnets day after day – had seemed doubly and trebly precious. Something to be clung to. A source of air-pure encouragement. But with the slow grinding of the months, one after another interminably the same but for their weather, he had simply lost the energy to read or to put cassettes into the player when he had still had batteries for it. Bit by bit in the business of survival books had ceased to mean anything to him, except as fire-lighting material, and so had music. He had forgotten them as if they had never affected him in any way.

And now the voice had come to a halt, the voice which had been sending to his heart that time-lost message, whatever words were being sung, some unlikely lady captured by a stage-villain Turk bewailing her lot, or a vengeful woman betrayed by an all-conquering lover, or a mythical queen claiming revenge. And with that halt he had been brought back once more to the desert of silence.

He would never find that marvellous sound. And he wanted to with a blotting-out vigour of desire which he thought had gone from him never to return. He wanted to get to its source, to hear it and see the singer, to bathe in it.

Then it began again. The same aria, sung with the same cascading beauty.

He pushed his head up the better to hear. He decided on the direction from which it was coming. In the enfolding darkness he set off at a run.

Fragments of rubbish in the roadway sent him slipping and staggering but hardly slowed him. And as he blundered on the music, which flowed unstopping, clearly grew louder. A stumbling turn, with under his feet the feel of cobblestones, meant he had entered some close-walled mews and at once the sound leapt in volume like a flame fed with fresh oil. It must be coming from the street at the other end of this narrow passage. It must.

A staggering run, leaning dangerously far forward, and the sound gained in loudness with each lurching step.

And then, rounding the corner, there not far away was a light. It was in the first-floor window of a tall house, the soft glimmer of a candle reflected on glass. All the windows of the place seemed to have their panes intact. Miracle. And the voice was coming from behind the lighted window. Miracle of miracles.

He advanced, crunching careless of everything over small debris of some sort, abruptly transforming his pace from wild blundering to holily slow. At any instant, he felt, the whole house-front, the candle-flickering window, the magic music coming from behind it would disappear like a fragile palace of ice breathed on by some fiery dragon.

But it did not. The candle-light flickered. The music cascaded.

He reached the house. Above, that pure voice went on singing and singing, up, down, up, down, glittering decoration flung off in crystalline streams. There. Beyond doubt there.

A flight of four steps led up to the substantial front door. He decided there was nothing else for it but to go up them and to try the heavy doorknob. If the door did not open he

would wait till the aria came to an end and then he would knock. But he would get in. He must.

He mounted the steps, feeling them charged with meaning as those of an altar. He put his hand on the doorknob.

It swung away from him and the door gave the slightest of squeaks.

He almost expected the music to stop at the sound, tiny though it was. But it went on unfalteringly. Directly in front of him in the faint light coming from a door slightly ajar he could make out a flight of wide stairs, carpetless but with their carved banisters still intact. Preserved.

He walked forward to the stairs – the floor under his feet was rock-solid – and simply went up them towards the door through which the faint golden candle-light was coming. And still the trills, the poised high notes, the sweet unerring descents continued. Softly as he could he went up to the door. He reached it. He looked in round it.

The room he saw was big. It must have been a fine drawing-room once. Now it was almost completely bare. Vaguely he glimpsed a pile of bedding in a corner. But what caught his attention was first the candle, which was in a tall brass candlestick up on a noble carved mantelpiece backed by a huge gilt-framed mirror, under which a dull fire slumbered, and then the piano, a concert grand, black and lustrous. Almost hidden behind its raised lid, the singer sat dressed in something long and white made richer with pearly ornamentation. She was, from what he could see, a majestically built creature with a pile of yellowy hair, not young, not old. She was accompanying herself as she sang with closed eyes.

He stood in the doorway, still as he could stay, and waited for the aria to reach its end.

When it did so the singer, after a long pause, opened her eyes. He stood without moving so as not to alarm her. Then,

when he saw that she had taken in his presence there, something moved him not to speak but to applaud. He clapped quietly for half a minute, a minute, more. When at last he broke off the singer rose from the piano without a word and made him a slow curtsey.

‘It is a long long while since I sang before an audience,’ she said in a voice of measured dignity. ‘Do you know how to shoot a gun?’

He blinked, feeling a sudden blanket-stifling bewilderment.

‘A gun,’ the majestic creature repeated with a tinge of irritation. ‘Do you know what to do with a gun? You ought to: you’re a man.’

He shook his head, the dense feeling of clogging stupidity thickening in his mind instant by instant.

‘To do with a gun?’ he asked gropingly. ‘What gun?’

‘That one there. But surely one gun is like another.’

She had gestured towards a corner, a generous movement conveying ‘Look’ to the topmost row of the opera-house.

He looked. Leaning against the wall, barely visible in the candle-light, was what he guessed to be a sporting rifle of some sort.

‘I suppose I could use it, if I had to,’ he answered with painful slowness. ‘If there was ammunition, that is.’

He became aware of a sweet cloying odour. And then he knew what it was. Powder. Face-powder. She must still be using it, have a huge supply somewhere.

‘Ammunition?’ she answered, somewhat sharply.

Again he felt that deadening bewilderment.

‘Ammunition, bullets,’ he said.

‘Oh, there are boxes and boxes of bullets. Downstairs where I found the gun. So, good. You can stay and protect me. I won’t sing any more tonight.’

The sheer effrontery of what she had said sent another dazing muffled blow through his head. He struggled with possible replies. To compliment her on her voice again, in case she was mad and dangerous? To ask simply how she came to be here, singing in the dead acres of deserted Mayfair? To ask her her name? To ask where the bullets were exactly? To ask if she could get him a drink of water?

But he was not to have to choose between these flooding-in demands.

The mere state of turmoil they had induced in him piled on to the effects of his beating-up, the slicing shock of seeing Dr Satpathi die, even his lack of food – he had had nothing since he had shared his twist of fire-baked bread in the Estate cell – all worked on him with the suddenness of seemingly solid ground without warning caving in.

He felt momentarily dizzy, was just aware that he was falling and then altogether lost consciousness.

Part Eight

What brought Mark back to consciousness was moonlight. He came to, seemingly from a deep sleep, to find his eyes filled with moonlight slanting across the big room and so strong it was hard to look into.

At once the thought of what moonlight signified swept coldly into him.

It must be well past 4 a.m. if the moon were this high in the sky. And, before, it had been only perhaps midnight. He had lost four hours. Five even.

He began to push himself up, the remembrance of where he was and how he had come to be there – what madness had possessed him to go haring after the sound of that singing the way he had? – returning to him piece by piece. His sudden carried-away lurching run through the deadened silent Mayfair streets and mews in search of that will-o'-the-wisp voice. The candlelit window. The unlocked door. The fairytale atmosphere of it all. Had he been bewitched, literally? Yes, he had indeed been bewitched from his duty to Jasmine, dying there in Wimbledon. Perhaps now even dead already.

But, no, that at least was not possible. It was still dark. At the very worst it could not be much past 6 a.m. That would give him six hours still. And six hours would be enough. If he kept going at a good hard pace. And there would be

daylight to see by before much longer. It ought to be still well possible.

He made to get right up.

And only then did he properly realise exactly whereabouts in the big room he was. He had been standing just inside the doorway when that confused blackness had come in on him. But now he was lying, not where he had fallen, but in the corner where as he had entered he had glimpsed a pile of bedding. And soft bedding was under him, and across his stomach preventing him from rising there was a heavy arm.

And the hand – by God, yes – was resting on his genitals. His trousers had been opened. The fingers were lightly curled. And he was in a state of slight excitement.

The very realisation of what must have happened produced in him at that moment a sudden thrill of long-in-abeyance sexual urgency.

The train of events was clear. The singer – she had been saying this to him when he had collapsed – had wanted him to stay, had wanted him as a protector, had needed someone who could use that gun which she was too ignorant to be able to handle herself, and she was offering him as payment this. Warmth, food no doubt, and herself.

And her music.

He felt the temptation, a strong dark-running stream. It would be a wonderful life. Like the life that had used to be. Comfort. Food there for the taking, because, yes, if there were ‘boxes and boxes’ of ammunition there was bound to be crate after crate of provisions, equally left by some former occupant and missed by the looters, canned breasts of chicken, quail, turkey, lobster bisque soup, asparagus tips, fine coffee beans in sealed containers, wine too in all probability. A fine cellar. And then the music. She would sing for him, night after night. He would live life as it was meant to be once again, as it had been before. And the soft

enfolding of her body. It had been a long, long time since he had experienced all that that was.

He lay and thought about it. A refuge. Out of the danger-swirling hurly-burly ravaging of the deserted city. To have those hidden, fire snaking under the ground, unknowable perils barred off at all points. And the refuge would be one answering to his own most felt needs. No requirement here to summon up postures of religiosity so as to share the protection of some place like the Baths at Kentish Town, no requirement to obey a savage self-motifying code in anywhere like the Estate. Here the essence of the human spirit that had moved him and ruled him before would once more be his to command, to live in.

A real life again.

So why was there doubt in his mind? He could abandon Jasmine. He had done his best to reach her. He had already risked enormously much more for her than he had risked for anything in his whole life before. Surely he could retire honourably from the journey now?

He lay trying to spread a blankness over his mind.

Because he knew that he could not retire. Little Dr Satpathi's story of the King who had learnt the value of the sweat of the brow was there in his head linked to a whole train of other things he had discovered since he had set out, and no amount of arguing and rationalising could push that thought down. An obstinate stony shape.

The King had come to see that he had to live in the real world. And for him himself to grab now at this unexpectedly offered chance of wrapping himself round with comforts would be to do once again what he had persistently done long ago in his days with Jasmine. To opt out. To let things happen.

Very quietly he put his hand on top of the singer's and with every gentleness he lifted it and eased himself from under her weighty slumbering arm.

Dying Jasmine. The claim of the past that had happened. Wife, wife, bane of my life. No other possibility was really open to him. Perhaps, when this was over, he might try to come back ... But a future that far away, far away in terms of hazards, was too remote to contemplate.

He got cautiously to his feet and crept over to the window by the piano so as to get a better idea of the position of the moon and of the time through its miraculously whole panes.

So far as he was able to judge, it was probably not much after 5 a.m. with the moon still not all that high in the sky. Bad enough, but the moonlight itself should be a tremendous help. The weather, he saw too, had changed radically. Instead of the uniform cloud layer there had been before, ragged black shapes were moving fast now across an otherwise clear and starry sky. Nor was it as cold. It was, in fact, distinctly warmish and damp, almost muggy. Well, November could do that.

As he turned from his inspection of the night he caught a strong whiff of aniseed from the broken bottle still in his pocket. It was, he thought, a piquancy, with its overtones of sophistication, oddly appropriate to the luxurious surroundings he was leaving.

He gave a last look to the room's sleeping occupant – she was snoring lightly, a pleasant rather musical sound – and then he tip-toed through the still slightly ajar door.

Outside, he found the street transformed. In the softly flooding moonlight it glittered like the Milky Way. Evidently tiny fragments of glass from the windows shattered in almost every other house nearby had been lying there all along – he had just been aware of crunching over them as he had come up – and now with the moonlight pouring down on to them they sparkled like a largesse of diamonds.

He made his way along over them as easily as if he was in one of the glaringly over-lit streets of old, and at the

corner he found no difficulty in heading southwards once again.

Within five minutes he was stepping from an alley-like lane into the wide sweep of Piccadilly. Opposite lay Green Park, looking rollingly rural in the moonlight with the dark masses of its huge, not yet wholly leafless planes casting soft sprawling shadows and its knee-high grass swaying gently in the warmish southwesterly wind. To his left, as he looked this way and that, he saw the famous club almost always called 'the In and Out'. Those two stark injunctions to vehicles were still visible in their thick black letters on the white of its forecourt entrance pillars. In the building itself a stray shell had at some time punched a neat hole just under the roofline.

He strode out across the wide tarmac in front of him. Down to the right by Hyde Park Corner, he noticed, a young tree had thrust itself through the exact centre of the roadway. In the strong light from the moon its bare branches stood out blackly, a pen-and-ink drawing. There was a gateway into the park almost directly opposite him, its gates had gone though most of the railings on either side were intact.

On the other side he paused for a moment taking in the sight before him, the waiting park. How different it looked in its remote loneliness from the way he remembered it, shut off by night but by day alive with people strolling over its well-trimmed grass like stiff well-behaved dolls, clean, bright-coloured, at leisure, safe. But that had been long, long ago.

And now ... Now there was still a straight path running in front of him, broad enough for the grass not to have encroached entirely over its asphalt, with swollen-trunked planes on either side making an avenue. And it led due south, as far as he could recollect, coming out beside Buckingham Palace. Skirt round the Palace and he would be

in Buckingham Palace Road, and that would lead him almost to Chelsea Bridge.

He hurried forward. His sleep or faint or whatever it had been had done him good. His bruises, though they had made him creakingly stiff for the first few yards he had walked, were only dully painful now.

Wimbledon. He was not so many miles distant from that little pebbledashed house here. The River surely must mark much more than half of what was in fact less than a day's walk, and he could be crossing it in half an hour's time. And if it was no more than 5 a.m. now, then he could be at the house easily before midday.

To confront Jasmine.

But what exactly to say to her then? She wanted, her mother had told him, to put her life in order. Well, it had been disordered enough. He certainly would have things to say to her on that score. But to forgive her for it? Could he do that? Had he forgiven her those years of misery she had brought him? Wouldn't it be wrong to say that he had simply because she was dying? The fact of her imminent death had not brought him all this way, through all that he had come through, just to feed her with platitudinous lies. And he had not forgiven her. Time had not altered anything. Only, in the ground-down years of the recent past, he had been without desire to re-sharpen the edges that had kept the sores fresh.

Should he make himself forgive her now? No. That surely would be to condone the life she had led. And wildness like that must not be condoned.

The lip of a huge ragged rain-heavy cloud met the pinky silver disc of the moon and a vast shadow raced across the waving grass towards him, seeming even to contain within it little devil shadows coming forward of their own volition.

He shook himself.

Ridiculous to let himself be so deeply affected by the remembrance of Jasmine and her lovers, her cannabis sessions, her drunks, her gambling club nights, her jobs taken up and abandoned, her ambitions.

He strode out along the wide path, easy to walk on despite the invading grass. Even with the moon behind the cloud it was not at all difficult to keep direction.

And then, somewhere behind him, he heard, above the souging of the wind in the branches of the huge planes, a curious sound.

He stopped and listened hard.

In a moment it came again. Something between a whimper and a snarl.

A dog. It must be one of the stray dogs that were everywhere. Best to hurry on. They could be nasty, and not only to children like the bedraggled little girl in the pink frock Brian Parkinson had rescued.

But, hardly had he set off again, when he heard a second similar sound, seeming to come this time from over his other shoulder. For an instant he considered halting again to make sure his senses were not deceiving him. But it came to him immediately that it was altogether likely that there should be more than one dog in the park. It was the sort of place they might well gather together.

Almost at once, in confirmation, a whole series of whinings broke out behind him. Distinct and separate sounds.

A pack. There must be a pack of dogs roaming here in the tall swaying grass. A pack of dogs long since lost to domesticity.

He quickened his pace to a walk that was only just short of a run.

It should take less than ten minutes, five even, to cross to the far side, and there surely there were buildings beyond the Palace where he could barricade himself in if he had to.

He wished he had taken that gun from the singer. But he would have had to have searched for ammunition and he would not have been so expert with it in any case.

Besides, he could be in no real danger.

But he kept up the striding walk that had sent a sweat flushing up over his whole body. And it soon became unmistakably clear that the dogs were tracking him. There was a wide sickle of whining behind him, rising and falling.

The Pernod, he thought. Its sharp aniseed smell still hung on him. Aniseed, the traditional lure for hounds.

He broke into a run, an awkward trot, the best he could manage in his bruised condition. And at that moment the moon briefly emerged from the cloud and one of the animals directly behind him gave a long neck-stretched howl.

But he must be almost at the other side now. There was a distant glimmer of whiteness not far away that should be the Palace.

He found he could run faster than he had thought, a lot faster in a wild swaying flight.

Then, like a ribbon of tide racing lickingly across flat sands, three or four of the pursuing animals crossed in front of him from the left and as they came on to the asphalt of the path scrambled skiddingly round and began bounding towards him. He swung desperately off to the side. At once his feet were clung at and obstructed by the grass.

A steepish bank rose ahead of him. He had forgotten that the park was not everywhere level. He plunged flailingly and succeeded in getting to the top.

But his speed had been slowed yet more.

Then the moon was blotted out again. The renewed darkness somehow gave him hope. He managed to increase his pace, taking huge leaps over the thick grass. But now he could hear more than excited whining from the pack behind him. He could hear breathing, hoarse gasping.

He did not dare turn his head.

A sharp little bark seemed to come from almost under his heels. He lunged forward once more.

And at last the ground appeared to be favouring him. He was at the start, he realised from the lower height of the big plane trees ahead, of quite a steep long dip. And wasn't that Piccadilly once more to his right? He swerved at once towards the distant outline of its tall buildings. In streets there would be shelter.

A thick-trunked plane loomed up. He peered ahead at it furiously. Could he climb it? But the swollen trunk would be impossible, and the nearest branches were much too high to jump to. Firewood. Damned firewood. Low branches would have been hacked off long ago.

But the ground was sloping downwards more steeply now, and that seemed to be favouring his heavy weight rather than the small bodies of his pursuers. The whines and whimpering were surely not so near now.

Then he tripped.

Concealed in the long swishing grass, some obstacle had sent him tumbling headlong. And the dogs were not so far behind after all. A moment later he felt hard paw-pads on his bare face and stubby claws begin to scrape. He rolled to protect himself.

His head came into contact with what had tripped him. A long branch broken off in some storm and hidden in the grass. He pushed out both hands and gripped it. Yes, it should make a weapon.

With a desperate heave he hurled off the animal beginning to tear at his coat collar and two others he could feel on his buttocks and staggered to his feet. He changed his grip on the branch and swung it with all his might round in a long low arc. And he felt it hit. Once and again. There were snarls in the dark. He flung his whole body round in

the other direction, sweeping the awkward branch back the way it had come. And again he made contact.

He could see now that the pack – there must be a dozen or more of them – were crouching there assessing the change of fortune. Too many to keep at bay for ever.

He began to retreat step by step. One, two, three, four. None of the animals had moved. Five, six. And then they started to come, growling deep in their throats, advancing soon faster than he could step backwards. He hurled the whole branch at them two-handed, heard a crack as it hit, turned and pounded off.

But, he realised at once, he had now been cut off from Piccadilly. And once more he could hear that eager whining close to his heels.

He ran on.

At last he came to the end of the long uphill stretch he had run down before and on the flat he felt he was holding his distance, just. But for how long could he keep going at this pace? He strained air in through his taut-stretched mouth.

There came a path, a wide irregular line of black asphalt. He thought of following it, but had no time to make the decision. At the far side after another few leaping paces he came to a bank again. He scrambled up, wearying with each stride.

They were nearer now, he could hear. Once more the sound of their breathing was in his ears. He wanted achingly to lie down to end it all. But the thought of teeth tearing at his flesh kept him running.

The moon emerged again. By its soft spread of light he saw that he had come right back across the park and was near the corner he had originally been making for. Beyond the jagged remains of a set of tall railings lay the high intact form of the Palace. But that was a full two hundred yards away.

He felt a sudden heavy tug at the skirt of his burberry. It nearly brought him to a halt. But the force of his careering flight was too great. The double cloth ripped and he shot forward. A moment later he found himself stumbling out of the high grass and on to asphalt, a round area of it.

And there directly in front of him was a lamp-post. It was ten or twelve feet tall and he saw at once that its pillar sprang with marvellous rightness from a thicker base about four feet high. Clear in the moonlight the figure '22', long ago painted in white on the dark base by some officious maintenance man, jabbed at his conscious.

With not the least hesitation, he leapt upwards. His right foot landed on the narrow top of the base. His hands went clasping round the pillar. There was a long cross-bar just underneath the big lantern, made for resting a ladder against. It looked frail, but he stretched up to it with grasping extended fingers. He caught hold and heaved. The bar held. He was able to reach up with his right hand as he scrabbled a tyre-shod foot against the pillar and grasp the top of the lantern, its glass holed by long-ago thrown stones. He heaved and hauled himself upwards till he got first his knees and then his feet on to the cross-bar. Then he looked down.

He was a clear ten feet or more above the ground. Round the lamp the dogs jumped and snarled. But the largest of them – it looked like a Dobermann – was able to get only to within six inches of his feet.

A wave of sickness came over him and he had to hold on hard as he could to stop himself falling.

He shook his head. All right, he was out of the animals' reach, but he was far from saved. They showed no signs of leaving and there was no means of getting past them. A leap, however desperate, would put him only where he had been before, almost within biting distance.

He took a long survey of his surroundings. In the moonlight the distant scene was peaceful as a painting. The branches of the planes nearby moved a little with the wind but otherwise everything was as still as if he was indeed looking at a landscape picture. Away beyond the broken park railings he could see the Victoria monument, a small whitish hillock with the figure at the very top, still gilded, glinting as it caught the light. Further round there loomed the immense white bulk of the Palace, like a cliff. And nothing stirring.

So it was stalemate.

He was like the man in Dr Satpathi's story, he thought with a wry twinge, dancing round the tree with the bear. Only in this picture-still scene there was no traveller likely to come by to whom he could call out ingeniously that coins were falling from the bear's anus. And even if his equivalent should come into view it was more than likely that a shout would send him running hard for safety. Innocent dupes, and Good Samaritans, had long ago learnt better in this London.

Nor was he at all sure that if some similar magical opportunity did present itself he would be resourceful enough to seize it. He felt too chilled. In mind and body. It was all very well in theory to wish for a bicycle to steal and feel wily because he had had the wish. But, caught now in real trouble, no glimmer of wiliness seemed to have rubbed off on him from anywhere.

No, so far as he could see he was going to be clinging here – already all but two or three of the dogs had sat back patiently on their haunches – when daylight came and still clinging when midday arrived and over in distant Wimbledon Jasmine would begin to cease to float on Tommy's potions and slip for ever beyond his reach.

If he could cling on even as long as that. Because it was certainly a question of needing to cling. The bulky inverted

shape of the lantern permitted nothing else.

He took another hope-deprived look round. And checked himself. Across at the Palace the great twelve-foot railings round the forecourt had been broken in one small place down to about half their original height, possibly by some stray shell in the Second Riots. If he could only get to that gap he could surely scramble over and the height of the remaining railings ought to be enough to stop the dogs or at least to keep them back for some time. And there must be somewhere round the far side of the huge building where he could find some sort of hiding-place and lose them. It was a possibility. It must be.

Before the thought of all the things that might go wrong had got too deep a grip he acted. He shifted his position quietly so as not to excite the dogs again, and then he flung himself outwards and downwards, legs stiffly extended, aiming as well as he could for the head of the big Dobermann.

It worked. He hit the dog full on its jowls. A bony crunch. With a heave forward of his whole torso he managed to prevent himself falling on his back. He staggered off the animal's body and set off running, hard as his legs would go.

And, he felt almost certain as he pounded towards the Palace railings, the rest of the pack had been taken by surprise by his sudden action. He left the soft earth of the park and headed full out across the wide weed-clumped roadway at the start of Constitution Hill. The gap in the railings was straight in front of him.

He reached it. It was not as high as he had thought looking at it from a distance, though that made it easier for him as he scrambled over.

But it was not going to hold the dogs back for long. He felt panic leap up again. The high white stone walls of the Palace, all heavy blocks and pillars, stared at him blankly.

He was not going to be able to force his way in anywhere there.

One of the dogs, a collie, he saw as he glanced back, had already jumped for the gap. It was stuck at the top, wriggling this way and that and yelping frenziedly. It would be over in an instant.

‘Help,’ he called out, ridiculously.

And at once a tall pair of flush double-doors at the head of a short flight of steps at the nearest corner of the building were drawn rapidly back and out into the moonlight there stepped a figure.

It was that of a little old woman, well under five feet tall, with a shock of straight hair, wearing wrapped round her a big old dark-grey plastic mackintosh, gesturing and capering wildly and uttering piercingly shrill shrieks.

Part Nine

However odd and unexpected the apparition at the Palace side-door, Mark had no hesitation in running straight over. The furious barking of the pack behind him urged him on irresistibly.

In seconds he had pelted across the broad forecourt and was at the foot of the steps.

‘Come on, come on. That’s right.’

The little old woman seemed no less bizarre close to than she had done at his first prayer-answered sight of her. The hair standing out round her head like a crudely-made upside-down grass basket was of a dark grey. The face beneath, now that he could see something of it, looked tanned as leather and was scored with deep wrinkles everywhere. And her mackintosh garment, hacked short with shears, wrapped her round a good one and a half times and was secured by thick red ceremonial cording, probably from the Palace out of which she had so suddenly emerged.

He climbed up to her, panting too heavily to speak.

‘Come in, come in,’ she said, cackling with excitement. ‘Let Old Marigold get these doors shut. Dratted dogs. Never any peace from ‘em.’

He stumbled inside. The place was in black darkness. Behind him the little old woman slammed both doors one

after the other. He leant against the wall beside them, too exhausted to move.

In the blackness his rescuer was muttering away but, with warm relief washing through all his taut body, he was not willing to make the effort to understand her.

Then once more an aniseed whiff from the broken bottle came to his nostrils and he felt in his mind again the claws that had scraped at his face, the tug on the skirt of his old coat that had nearly brought him down and the crunching jar when his feet had struck the head of the big Dobermann. Frantically he plunged his hand into his pocket, grasped the lining, dragged it out and sent fragments of glass scattering with a bright clatter over what must be a marble floor. Then he beat and rubbed at the sticky soaked lining in a preposterous attempt to eliminate every last taint of the treacherous stuff.

He knew he was sobbing with repulsion. And he could not stop himself.

'There, there. You're all right now. You're all right. They've gone, them dogs. Gone right away. You'll be all right now with Old Marigold. Old Mad Marigold.'

The last two cackled words of would-be comfort stopped the sobbing when they penetrated as effectively as a thrown bucket of cold water.

Mad Marigold. Mad. Of course, she had shown every sign of being a madwoman. Yet another mad person. Again involved with madness. The loony window-cleaner. The Rev, surely paranoid. Even Brian Parkinson, cheerful and good-hearted though he was, not truly sane, or he would never have led them into that trouble. Or had the against-logic willpower to get them out. And then the Happies in their swerving swaying truck. Self-induced lunacy there certainly.

It was a mad world he was moving in. But no wonder. The years leading up to the breakdown of the city had been enough to have driven any number of people insane. All

those half-acknowledged, or often unacknowledged, cases, the borderline certifiable in the days when there had been doctors to certify, the merely odd, the mutterers in the streets and all those derelicts spun off by an ever-faster-whirling society. And there must, too, be wandering now thousands from institutions and hospitals who when there was no longer anyone to look after them had just walked out.

No, no wonder the old woman in the dark beside him – she was chirruping and humming to herself like some contented little animal – should turn out to be mentally unbalanced. She must, since she had had no hesitation in calling herself mad, be one of the escapees. But her company would have its complications. Perhaps, though, they would not be thrust together long.

‘Here.’

Suddenly she had addressed him more clearly, even peremptorily.

‘Here. We’ll have a lovely time, you an’ me. There’s no one else here just now, you know. No one. Generally is, every time Old Marigold comes. But this once, not a bleeding soul. So it’s nice to be together, eh?’

Cautiously he made no answer.

‘Eh? Eh? Nice for Old Marigold to have you to talk to?’

He felt her hand suddenly on his face in the dark, fingers feeling at his cheeks and beard like cold dry little dancers. He flinched.

‘Oh, you’re nice. Old Marigold can tell. Old Marigold can feel it out. You’re nice. Nice, but a bit scared, eh? Scared of poor old Mad Marigold.’

Another stiffening of his facial muscles must have told her that she had hit on the truth, because she gave a brief cackle of laughter.

‘Oh, but you ain’t got no need to be. Old Marigold may be gorn in the head, but she’s pretty well harmless. Pretty well

harmless. Tell you what.'

He prickled at the abrupt addition.

Marigold laughed again.

'No. I was going to say: we'll have a bit o' light. That'll cheer you up, an' Old Marigold ain't so mad as what she ain't got a butt o' candle in her pocket. You wait. We'll have a light, an' then we'll go an' have our breffkast. Ain't daytime yet, but we'll have breffkast all the same.'

'No,' he said. 'No.'

He would explain to her. That would be the best way.

'Look, Marigold,' he began. 'I can't stay to have breakfast with you because I'm on my way to Wimbledon and I'm in a great hurry. I've come from Highgate and I was crossing Green Park when those dogs ... You see, I've got something very important to do at Wimbledon. It's to see my wife. I'm afraid she's very ill.'

'Dying,' said Marigold. 'Dying. Dying.'

'Yes,' he admitted. 'Somehow you've guessed it. She is dying, and I've got to get to her as quickly as I can.'

' 'Course you have.'

Ah, marvellous. She'd taken the point.

'So, can you show me how to get out of the Palace somewhere else, on the far side where the dogs won't find me?'

She did not reply. He felt a dart of exasperation. Then he heard her moving in the dark. What was she doing? The answer came at once. There was a scraping sound and a little flare of light sprang up. A match. She had matches. How had a witless old woman like her got hold of matches?

'Oh, Old Marigold knows them as has matches,' she said, as if he had spoken his question aloud. 'An' she knows what to barter for 'em. Oh, yes, Mad Marigold's a clever one, she is.'

She had lit a candle now. He saw her seamed and creased old face, the nose curling down almost to the lips and hairs sprouting at random under the grass-basket thatch of hair.

‘You come upstairs with me,’ she said. ‘An’ I’ll just get me things together.’

‘Your things?’

‘Yes, got to get me things, if I’m coming with you.’

‘But – but you’re not.’

He sounded ridiculously indignant, even to his own ears.

‘Have to, dear, won’t I, if you’re in a hurry to get to your poor wife,’ she replied, cheerfully unput-off. ‘You ain’t got the sense to get along on your own, an’ that’s a fac’. Setting off across Green Park like that in the middle o’ the night. Stands to reason there’d be dogs. But you wouldn’t see that, you wouldn’t. You just don’t know the half of it.’

She was already mounting a wide staircase, its fine gilt banisters glinting in the wavering flame of her candle-butt. He followed. To be left in the thick dark in the vast maze of the Palace would be senseless.

And it was true enough really that he was an innocent abroad. She was right about that, mad though she might be.

The stairs brought them to a large room on the first floor. He sensed that it occupied probably the whole front corner of the great building, although beyond the halo of light from Marigold’s candle he could see little more than a patch of deep red ceiling, tall walls of a lightish blue colour and what looked like Chinese-type decoration with, below, a dado of heavy gold and red in a bamboo-trellis design.

Standing against the dado was an ancient shopping push-basket with two little wheels and a handle like a walking-stick and beside it, spread out on sheets of old newspaper, was a collection of packets and parcels, bottles and boxes and jampots half-filled with dark liquids. Marigold squatted

down and with the dexterity of long practice replaced lids, tied up string and put each item swiftly into its place in the basket.

In a very short time she had finished.

‘Come on then,’ she said.

She led the way across to a pair of tall doors with pictures of many-roofed pagodas on them and, above, just to be glimpsed in the flicker of the candle, a gold arch writhing with a thick-bodied painted dragon. On the far side a long, long corridor, twelve feet high or more, ran into the darkness ahead. Its walls were patched where once paintings had been hung.

Where would these be now? Stored in some cave in Wales or somewhere, waiting for the ‘peace’ that was at best impossibly far off? So had they been defeated, those assertions of order created in the chaos of their times, comparatively feeble though they might be? Well, the great assertions, too, the ones which like Mozart proposed an order against all chaos, they must be stored away somewhere as well, such of them as had not been destroyed. Had they too lost their power there in the cave darkness? Or were they ever-burning lights against the return of a day when they could safely shine again for the thousands? If that day was ever to come.

Ahead, the wheels of Marigold’s shopper squeaked abominably and the shadow of her little figure danced this way and that as her candle tilted.

When they had gone what must have been a good hundred yards they came to a set of elaborate doors forming a mirror-screen right across the corridor. Marigold dealt with them briskly. And then a new long corridor stretched in front of them.

Squeak, squeak, squeak. He followed the insistent sound of the shopper’s wheels into the dark. Once they passed a column plinth with the bust that had stood on it carefully

removed. He wondered whom it might have been of. Not Lord Lister. Some other less worthy worthy, no doubt, whom the sculptor had intended to be preserved for ever against oblivion.

Then, just as he calculated they ought to be nearing the end of the second corridor, Marigold stopped. There was a door to their right. She opened it.

A random draught at once blew out her stub of candle.

‘Don’t matter,’ she said. ‘Marigold knows her way. You just take hold of her coat. You’ll be all right.’

He put out a hand, quite urgently, and found her shoulder. The plastic of her ancient mackintosh was hard and crackly to the touch.

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘You just keep hold.’

They set off into the darkness, which seemed absolute to him though Marigold crossed whatever room it was they had entered not much less quickly than before. The loud regular squeaking of the shopper was a decided comfort now.

They stopped and he heard the rattle of the handle of another door. When this opened he could feel quite strongly the current of cool air, a gust from which had blown the candle out.

‘We got some stairs down here,’ Marigold said.

Still keeping his hand on the cracked plastic of her mackintosh, he followed her downwards, the shopper bouncing on every step. He could smell her too now, a high ammoniacal odour.

When they reached the bottom they stepped into moonlight. It was diffused at first but, as they went along a short passageway, it grew brighter and when they turned at its end it positively flooded down, full as it had been when it had woken him in the house in Mayfair.

It was pouring in, he saw, through what had been one of the outer walls but was now an open shell-blasted space.

Beyond it must lie the Palace gardens.

'We got a nice old scramble next,' Marigold said, almost with relish it seemed.

She went across and, for all her diminutive size, climbed confidently over the broken wall. He followed.

Garden, he found when he had dropped down on the far side, was a misnomer. More than one shell must have landed in the area and the ground ahead was a welter of mounds and troughs grown over now with tall weeds but still, in Marigold's words, a nice old scramble to get past. But evidently she knew it well and she wriggled her way across in the moonlight like a supple animal, along a ridge, down into a dip, up again, round a jagged window frame jutting perilously up, twisting and turning, sometimes humping the shopper over her shoulder, sometimes squeaking it along for a yard or two.

When at last they emerged from the Palace grounds through what had once been a high blank wooden gate leading from the Royal Mews he recognised not far away to the right the big anonymous intersection at the start of Buckingham Palace Road.

Buckingham Palace Road. And a straight run to the River. He looked up at the sky. A large cloud was sailing towards the moon and away to the east he thought he could make out the first whitening of the new day. It must, then, be about 6.30.

He felt a stirring of confidence.

Marigold was standing in the gateway, looking from side to side, up and down, with the sharp life-preserving head movements of a bird.

'Come along then,' she said at last, rather in the tone of a small girl addressing a not particularly intelligent but lovable pet. He was even reminded of the newspaper and television pictures they had used to have almost annually of

a policeman shepherding ducklings across the gardens here into St James's Park.

He resented it. But he could not stride away from her immediately.

She had trotted into the roadway, the shopper squeaking out at a rapid rhythm. Hurrying to catch up with her, he reflected that if she was to stay with him for more than a quarter of an hour he would have somehow to oil its wheels. Otherwise the sound would drive him mad.

A new name for his list of the insane.

The centre of the road was clear enough, though pieces of rubble lay here and there on the pavements on both sides and the buildings – there had been rows of moderate-sized shops with offices above them – had plainly suffered a good deal, at least in their upper storeys. At ground level they seemed pretty well intact, bar the fact that the old shop-fronts were almost all open to the weather.

In one, just before the moon went behind the cloud, he saw under a sign saying 'Fashion Footwear Centre' a single one of the stilt-like block-soled sandals that had been the craze somewhere in the seventies. Perhaps the place had closed down about then and the shoe had lain behind its boarded window until it had been revealed again when shell blast had ripped the boards away to stay lying there ever since. A useless object.

Turning to keep up with Marigold – her rapid steps were getting them along at a good pace – he looked at her shoes. A man's pair, with a stuffing of newspaper to make them fit frothing over their edges. Not elegant. But practical.

They reached the end of the first stretch of Buckingham Palace Road where Victoria Street bears away to the left at Victoria Station.

Marigold halted.

'We'd best go down Vauxhall Bridge Road and cross the River there,' she said.

‘Well, I’d thought I’d go straight on and get over at Chelsea Bridge. It’s more direct. So if you want to go that way, I’ll say goodbye. And – er – thank you.’

She gave him a quick nursemaidly look.

‘Chelsea Barracks,’ she said. ‘There’s a nasty lot in there. You’ll come with me over Vauxhall.’

He hesitated. A nasty lot. Some robber baron’s rabble? Or another Regent’s Park Estate? It was likely as not that a wanderer like Marigold would know. And getting over the Thames at Vauxhall Bridge would not be much of a detour.

‘All right then.’

They rounded the corner and went on for a few yards. Then Marigold halted again.

‘We’ll go over here,’ she announced.

He frowned in puzzlement. There was no point as far as he could see in crossing the big bare empty roadway. Certainly soon they would have to veer to the right to get into Vauxhall Bridge Road, but they had no need to cross nor even to change course yet.

He looked this way and that, seeking for some danger which Marigold, animal-experienced in this deserted concrete and brickwork jungle, might have spotted and which he, the innocent, had missed. But there seemed to be nothing. Only the wide brownish expanse of worn tarmac with, still faintly to be seen just in front of them, the wide alternating black and white stripes of one of the old pedestrian rights-of-way, a zebra crossing. One of the posts that had marked it still had half of its orange globe on top.

‘Come on then,’ Marigold said, a little tetchily. ‘It’s a zebra, ain’t it? We’ll cross.’

‘But, Marigold ... There aren’t any cars any more. You can cross where you like, if you have to cross.’

She turned on him a gaze rich with venomous contempt.

‘Luck,’ she said. ‘Luck. Don’t you know that going over a pedestrian’s brings luck? Don’t you know nothing?’

He blinked.

'Well, by all means let's cross by this one, if you want to.'

Marigold bumped the shopper off the kerb and started across. Stumping a pace or two ahead she threw out another comment.

'An' I bet Old Marigold's had more luck than you, more luck than you've ever had in your whole bleeding life.'

It could be true, set aside her madness. Certainly his life had been far from lucky. And it still was not. Not much luck had come his way since leaving Highgate, except for Marigold having been inside the Palace when he had got over its railings just ahead of the dog pack.

Up on the far pavement they made their way past the small block of shops that had used to stand in front of the entrance to Victoria Station. There was an enamelled sign in green and white proclaiming 'Cheap Day Returns To All Parts.'

Then another chance to go across a zebra - he had already somehow appreciated that they brought luck only if they actually came on the route - and they had reached the beginning of Vauxhall Bridge Road.

Now the sun was just below the horizon somewhere over to their left and with every moment the light was getting brighter. It showed the wide street empty in front of them except here and there for dust-scuffling little bands of sparrows twittering eagerly at the start of a new day. But the whole long row of buildings had suffered enormously in the fighting of the Second Riots. Mark felt that if he had been put down into it from some helicopter he would not have had the least idea where he was although he had known it more than well in the old days. There was not a block that was not broken and blasted, the tall towers put up in the sixties equally with the ornately faced offices erected a century or more earlier. Shells and rockets had grooved out long scars on the walls and brown-patched

them with scorch marks. The turnings on either side were impassable with the remains of once fiercely-contested barricades, buses piled one on another, gaps filled with crushed cars. The arch that had used to lead to the side entrance to the big station through a tall flat-fronted building just to their right had been closed entirely by two large transport containers, now beginning to fall to pieces. The walls of the buildings opposite, a row of smallish shops – one, he saw, had sold tropical fish and he could just make out the bright signs that had told customers that credit cards were accepted – were so riddled with the holes made by armoured bullets and pieces of shrapnel that they looked as if they were made of pure lace. It was a wonder they had stayed upright so long since.

But at least the centre of the roadway was unimpeded.

As Marigold seemed to appreciate.

‘Soon have you there now,’ she said, giving her shoulders a brisk shake.

But perhaps this was the time to make the break.

‘Well, yes, it looks fine,’ he answered carefully. ‘And it’s been good of you to come this far with me. But once I’m over the bridge, I’m sure I shall be okay on my own.’

‘Oh, no, you won’t.’

He felt a quick jet of anger. But he stopped himself showing it.

‘No, really,’ he said. ‘You’ve been very kind, but I can find my way easily once I’m over the bridge. I’ll go along Wandsworth Road and then turn and cross over Clapham Common and then –’

He stopped.

‘No,’ he said, with a little dry laugh. ‘No, of course, I won’t cross the Common, just in case there are dogs there too. I’ll go by South Lambeth Road instead.’

‘An’ what makes you think you’re going to get across the bridge in the first place?’ Marigold demanded in answer.

‘Get across— But that’s what we agreed we’d do.’

‘There’ll be soldiers on that bridge, like as not. Soldiers on all the bridges just now. Lot of Army on the other side. Didn’t know that, did you?’

‘Well, no. No, I didn’t. And you think they won’t let anybody cross?’

‘Depends, don’t it? Depends what they feel.’

He experienced an access of depression. Walking along at their brisk pace, he had begun to feel that everything was at last going to be easy. But this sudden discovery that the Army was established in force just south of the River seemed to present problems he could see no certain way of overcoming. Even if the soldiers let people across Vauxhall Bridge, would they permit free movement through the area on the other side? It was not very likely. If the Army was planning at this of all times to resume control of Central London – and why else would troops be massing on the south bank? – then unaccounted – for civilians would never be allowed to go wherever they pleased. At best, then, he faced a huge detour. And at worst he could find himself arrested, put into some detention camp. He had heard about such places, crowded with people who had fallen foul of the military in one way or another.

Whatever happened the moment of reaching Jasmine must be delayed by hours and hours. By too many hours, in all probability. There were few enough left now.

‘What – what are we going to do?’ he asked, conscious of how feeble he sounded, but unable to think of anything more constructive.

Marigold turned and gave him a sharp smile.

‘Have to see, won’t we?’ she said. ‘Never can do more than see, not no one.’

He needed a moment or two to sort out those jutting spears of double negatives, but when he had done so he saw that she was making sense. Wait and see. Mad

Marigold might be, but that was probably the sensible course.

They tramped on. Behind the blasted buildings on their left, the sky, clear of cloud, grew lighter and lighter. Ahead, as the road bore gently eastwards, a partially wrecked high tower building came into view outlined against storm-cloud, looking at this distance like some romantic ruin of old.

‘Going to be a nice day,’ Marigold said. ‘We’ll get some rain before long. Always like a bit o’ rain.’

‘But don’t you get wet?’

Her cracked old mackintosh would scarcely keep out the lightest of showers, and up at Highgate he himself had always tried to avoid going out when it was raining. His burberry took hours to dry in the scarcely heated house and his shoes had not been properly waterproof for years.

‘Oh, yes, Old Marigold gets a bit wet. But she don’t mind that. An’ it cleans the place up wonderful, a bit o’ rain.’

‘Yes,’ he said, becoming conscious again at once of the ever-pervading faint smell of decay, of the extra whiffs that came out of the blocked storm-drains, of the occasional sweetly rotten stench where some animal had died, or some person.

They had just passed, off to the right, the remains of a shop-sign saying ‘Funerals’. How long had it been since the dead had been buried with ceremony? Since many of them had been buried at all?

The bridge, with its possible complement of soldiers barring any passage, was not yet in sight. But they were nearing it steadily. Ahead, to the right, he recognised a complex of brick-built buildings as an estate that had been put up when it had begun to be realised that cramming people into high-rise blocks had been a mistake. Even with walls crumbling and shell-battered it still looked as if it would have been a pleasant place to have lived in. Not

everything had been bad in those days before the explosion.

Suddenly he found that he wanted to know more about Marigold, about her life in those days and about her life now.

‘What were you doing in the Palace last night?’ he asked. ‘You said you’d arrived in the evening. Where were you on your way to?’

‘Just here an’ there, just here an’ there,’ she answered. ‘It was coming on dark an’ as I’d got to be near old Buck’nim Palace I thought I’d pop in.’

‘Lucky for me you did.’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, with a touch of cheerful contempt which in spite of himself he found he now rather liked. ‘Oh, yes. An’ I dare say you’d got yourself into other scrapes before them dogs.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I had.’

So, instead of learning about her, he told her about himself, about his meeting with Dr Satpathi suffering under the bullying of the hulking window-cleaner, about Brian Parkinson jumping on him from the bakery window as he had been scouting round the arrack drunks and how in the end the amateur soldier knight-errant had led them into Regent’s Park Estate and how Dr Satpathi had died.

‘Poor little feller,’ Marigold said. ‘Ah, here’s the old bridge.’

He looked up.

The bridge was fully in sight. And on it, clear in the increasing daylight, were two big camouflage-painted tanks, squatting like a pair of rough-skinned toads.

‘We’ll have to try to cross somewhere else,’ he said at once.

Marigold laughed.

‘Oh, there’s no doing with you. If it ain’t traipsing across a park full o’ dogs, it’s wanting to run a mile just because he sees a soldier.’

He felt insulted. Which was absurd.

‘It’s not a soldier,’ he said. ‘It’s tanks. They’ll never let us over if they’re guarding the bridge that well.’

Marigold looked at him. Her wrinkled brown face was alive with cunning.

‘They won’t let you over,’ she said. ‘Not looking like what you do. But they’ll let Old Marigold over. Or they won’t. An’ if you looks like Old Marigold they’ll let you over too. Or they won’t.’

‘Look like you?’

Puzzlement occupied the whole of his mind.

‘Mad, dearie. Mad. You got to look mad.’ ‘But-’

Then he saw that she just might be right. Soldiers on guard, if they were not actually guarding the heart of an operations group, might well let an old madwoman wander past. Or even an old madwoman and a madman.

‘What would I have to do?’ he asked.

She gave a cackle of laughter.

‘Oh, it ain’t difficult, dearie. To be mad. Ain’t no trouble at all.’

‘Yes, but ...’

‘Talk to yourself, dear. You could begin by that.’

She turned and set off again.

‘Come on, come on,’ she said. ‘Waiting about won’t be no help.’

She headed straight towards the bridge, past the open space of Bessborough Gardens to the right with the tower building on its south side that had looked so romantic when they had first seen it in the distance now no more than a battered wreck. The push-basket went in an ever-louder

squeak-squeak-squeak rhythm, and all in a moment the sun rose clear of the horizon in a burst of pure gold light.

Following her, he kept his head hanging not daring to let whatever watchful eyes there were in the two tanks up on the bridge get even the least glimpse of his face. Talk to yourself, Marigold had said. Well, perhaps that would be enough to make him look decently mad. And his appearance must be raggle-taggle enough after all that he had been through. The strip ripped by the dog from the back of his burberry was still dangling down behind him.

‘Wife, wife, bane of my life. Wife, wife, bane of my life. Death to the French. Curses on thee, Spanish jade. A sleep and a forgetting. A sleep and a forgetting.’

The phrases, old familiar pieces of mental flotsam, rose from his subconscious with surprising ease. He began to swing his head from side to side to the beat of them.

Mad. Yes, he might do as a madman.

‘Wife, wife, bane of my life. Wife, wife ...’

They had reached the start of the road sweeping along beside the River. The tanks, squat and silent, were only fifty yards distant.

A swing of his flopping head gave him a glimpse far away to his left of something shining brightly in the sun’s first golden rays. At the next swing he recognised it. The Henry Moore sculpture up on the river embankment. A bronze, humped and enduring. Well, it had endured more than a little in the past years. More than a little. March on, Marigold. Only yards to go surely.

‘Halt, who goes there?’

He had to look up now from his head-swinging muttering.

From behind the nearer of the tanks two huge inflated figures had stepped. Soldiers in riot dress, green-drab all over, padded chests, padded legs, little flat toughened plastic spats over vulnerable ankles, padded arms with wide gridded plastic shields strapped to each right one, big

drum-like helmets merging into neck-guard flaps with thin eye-slits going half-way round.

The voice that had come from behind the closer one had boomed hollowly from the confinement.

'It's Mad Marigold, dearie. Only Old Mad Marigold, what they locked up 'cos she would go a-walking where she wanted. Old Mad Marigold, what they wanted to take a slice out o' her head. But, oh dear, she were too clever for 'em. Too clever by half. Walked out o' their place in her nightie, she did. All down the High Street in her old white nightie.'

She sounded madder by a good deal now, a wild cracked uncontrolled voice and wild uncontrolled thoughts. How mad was she then in fact? There was something of an act in this, so how much of it all was an act?

The answer came to him instantly and definitely, for all that he could produce no reasoning to back it. No, it was not an act. Marigold was mad. Incontrovertibly mad, despite her way of putting it on when it looked as if it would pay.

But would it pay now?

'Sorry, luv. You can't come this way. Bridges are blocked today.'

The hollow voice revealed itself as young and sympathetic. But a stickler for the rules.

Should they try one of the other bridges and see if they had better luck? Or would it be possible for him to swim it? He took a look down to the water thirty or forty feet below. Lighter in colour by a good deal than the Thames that had used to be, it was flowing fast, heavy and rain-laden. No, it would be a hell of a swim, and as likely as not at any moment a rifle bullet from above would bring it to a messy, sodden end.

He dropped his head again and took up his steady mad murmur.

'Wife, wife, bane of my life. A sleep and a forgetting. A sleep and ...'

‘But Marigold’s got to get to the other side. Marigold likes the other side.’

‘Dare say you do, luv. But I can’t let you by. Officer’d have my guts.’

Stopped. Barred. Journey’s end. Now. Here.

‘But that’s the nice side for Marigold. Poor old Marigold. Poor old Mad Marigold, all down the High Street in her white nightie.’

‘ ‘Ere, ducks.’ It was the second gross padded figure, from the sound of him a good deal older than the first. ‘Look, the officer’s having his breakfast just now, and it ain’t as if this is a real security area. So you just wander across, eh? And we won’t see you.’

The younger sentry seemed decidedly unhappy.

‘Oh, go on, they’ll not get us into trouble. Just you keep well over Lambeth way when you get across, ducks. Lambeth way. We don’t go much further than that, ‘cept the bridges. Know which way’s Lambeth, do you?’

‘Oh, yes. Marigold knows that. Marigold used to have her old Auntie May down by there afore it was all burnt down. All burnt to cinders. Black as black. Oh, yes, Marigold knows Lambeth all right.’

‘Well, you keep that way, ducks. You and your friend, and you won’t come to no harm.’

‘Oh, thank you, lovie. You’re kind to a poor old mad girl, you is. Kind as kind. Kind as kind.’

And, adding her murmuring to his own incoherent mutter, she began to push the squeaky shopper wanderingly in front of her off along the wide stretch of the bridge. He wandered and flopped in her wake.

‘Wife, wife. Wife, wife. Wife, wife.’

At last he risked a look ahead. The rest of the long bridge was empty, but, he could see as they neared the crest, there were a good many more troops on the far side, three tanks, five or six scout-cars, a short column of men in

battle-smocks marching across the wide space in front of the black rail viaduct that had once taken the lines out of Waterloo Station along beside the River.

Would they be able, when they reached the foot of the bridge, to steer a way through them all? There was plenty of space, and they ought to find it possible to keep clear of any actual contact. But he would not feel happy until they were out of sight of the military altogether.

But what was the meaning of such a concentration of force, and in such an evident state of readiness? What was it the older sentry had said? All the bridges blocked today. Was an Army push into the centre of the city really on the verge of beginning?

And would that be the beginning of a new beginning? The eventual re-establishment of order? And, if it was successful, what sort of order would there be? Did the mere creation of order inevitably foster the growth of a plant that in the end with its intertwining of tendril and tendril – like his run-to-wild front garden back in Highgate – would choke the whole race out of existence? Or did we have in us, lost once but perhaps to be kept at a second chance, enough humility not to pile complication on complication, desire on desire?

Well, the answer to that would come when it would come, perhaps quite soon with those waiting troops down there, perhaps in some other, different and later way. There was nothing to be done about it for him. What he had to do was to get to Jasmine. Jasmine, still under the bolstering influence of those concoctions of Tommy's, still alive and needing him. But for how much longer now?

Marigold, pushing her ever-squeaking shopper ahead of him, unexpectedly came to a halt.

'Now we'll have our breffkastses,' she said.

'Breakfasts?'

He nearly added, 'Are you mad?'

‘But, Marigold, we haven’t even got across the bridge. We can’t stop now. We mustn’t stop till we’re well past all that lot down there.’

‘Got to. You go an’ sit up on the edge there, an’ Marigold’ll come an’ sit beside you an’ then we’ll have a really nice breffkast.’

‘No, Marigold. If those sentries we got past see us stopping, they’ll come back and ask us what we’re up to. We must get on as fast as we can.’

‘Oh, you don’t know nothing, you don’t. Not fit to be out o’ school, you ain’t.’

She was busying herself rummaging in the shopper.

‘Look, Marigold – ‘

She glanced up sharply from her search, face malevolently alive.

‘Radios,’ she spat out at him.

He frowned.

‘Ain’t you never heard of radios. They all got ‘em, you know. An’ if those fellers we got by sees us hurrying an’ ducking an’ scared as scalded cats, they’ll be on their radios to the ones down there quick as quick. An’ then you’ll see who can kid ‘em out of putting us in one o’ their places.’

She was right, he realised. A sweat broke out all across his shoulders. If they had hurried as he had wanted to, the chances were that they would have drawn attention to themselves. And then they would have been stopped at the far end. And this time held.

No, to drift to a halt here as they had done, to sit up on the bridge parapet and eat something and chatter to each other, that ought to be the way to make sure they were taken for a couple of safe loonies. Marigold was right.

Only all the time they would be dangling themselves within reach of the military.

From the shopper Marigold had now produced a substantial packet swathed in an ancient newspaper – it was *The Times*, he saw – and had begun carefully unwrapping it. It proved to contain a good quantity of some darkish meat or other, small slivers taken off the bone. He wondered where she had succeeded in getting hold of that. It had been a long time since he himself had had anything other than his scrawny vegetables. And long, too, since he had eaten at all. He felt immensely hungry.

Marigold hopped up on to the wide-topped red-painted metal parapet looking down on to the swift-flowing Thames.

‘Up you come,’ she ordered. ‘It’s nice here.’

He sat himself beside her. She offered him the meat. He took a piece. It had been smoked and tasted pretty strong, but that was to be expected if it had been wrapped up long in that very ancient newspaper. He munched ravenously.

Marigold slid the rest of the pile on to the wall top and handed him the much-creased *Times*.

‘Now,’ she said twisting her legs happily together, ‘you can read it to me while we have our breffkasts.’

Well, it might make it easier to play out the charade.

He looked at the smeared print. The paper dated back to August 3, 1976. Perhaps she had found it lining some servant’s chest-of-drawers back in the Palace.

‘What shall I read?’ he asked.

‘Anything, dearie, anything. It’s all the same, ain’t it?’

‘Well, yes,’ he acknowledged. ‘But isn’t there something you’d particularly like?’

She peered at the greasy folded sheet.

‘Don’t that say “Letters”?’ she asked, jabbing a finger. ‘Don’t you think Marigold can’t read if she has to. “Letters” is what used to be on the outside o’ Post Offices, an’ I used to get me money from them. Read me one o’ the letters.’

He looked at the page. *The Times* had used to go in for occasional light relief in its letters columns. Perhaps one of those. *Derivation of 'Camp'*. No. Learned and slightly facetious discussion about the precise meaning of that ridiculous term he had long since forgotten – hadn't it meant something like 'Highly exaggerated, with a touch of the effeminate'? – was hardly going to interest Marigold, however half-important it had once seemed. Ah, this might do. *Foie Gras at Westminster*.

He read her the letter under that heading. Apparently some Members of Parliament in those long-ago days had been complaining about the method of making pâté de foie gras in France by force-feeding geese. And now someone was defending that minute consideration for animals.

'Yeh,' Marigold said when he had finished, 'but they always done that, them Frogs. So what's the fuss? Give us another one.'

But before he could pick out anything else, she suddenly looked up with a jerk into the now bright blue sky.

'Listen, listen,' she said.

He listened. A thin persistent droning sound was coming from somewhere high above them. A plane. In a disquieting quarter-second time-slip the sound took him back to the old days when if ever the traffic was quiet enough the noise of aircraft engines lacing the sky could be heard almost continuously.

He searched the blue now and in a few moments located far above the wheeling of the scavenger kites the source of this buzzfly droning. Very high up, a plane was making its way across the sky, wings glinting in the sunlight like a tiny silver fish.

An unusual sight, though not unprecedented. Aircraft seemed to overfly London now and again still, for what reason he did not know. But every two or three months he would see one. Perhaps the wrecked metropolis lay on some

alternative route that weather conditions occasionally imposed, say between New York and Peking. So why was this plane making Marigold so agitated?

She was bouncing up and down on the wide parapet.

‘One for joy, two for sorrow, three for a boy, four for tomorrow.’

‘Marigold, do they bring luck too?’

He was half-prepared to believe the claim.

‘ ‘Course they do. Don’t you know nothing? Well, come on then, boy, read more. Read me more. This is going to be all right,’

He hoped it was. But he could not stop himself being acutely conscious of how exposed they were. The young conscientious sentry by the tanks, would he after all take it into his head to order them back? All those men at the other end, what was to stop one of them, or more, suddenly setting out to investigate the two figures perched up here, full in the sunlight?

Take his mind off it. Read, as Marigold had asked.

He plunged at random. A letter from a surgeon.

‘ “In my clinic I saw a 17-year-old youth who told me that he was suffering from dyspepsia. He also told me that he smoked 30 cigarettes a day and drank between three and six pints of beer every night.”’

‘No,’ Marigold broke in. ‘Saw enough o’ the likes o’ that lad when I was younger. Go to another one.’

He refolded the greasy tattered paper with difficulty.

‘Here’s something. *“Ice Cream War in Finchley Road.”*’ It was an item in the Diary column. ‘Do you remember ice cream, Marigold?’

‘What you think? I may be mad, but I ain’t a cow or something. I knows what’s happened to me. An’ that’s been a sight too much.’

He felt the rebuke was just.

He read her the story. It was about a price war that had broken out between two American or half-American firms setting up to sell their particular products in Britain.

'Silly fools,' she said at the end of it. 'Here, have some more o' this an' find something else.'

He chewed a couple more of the meat slivers. He was still very hungry. And it was sensible, too, to build up energy while they could. He would need all the vigour he could muster to get to Wimbledon with much time to spare.

How much longer did they need to spend here?

He took a careful look both ways along the bridge. Behind the tanks the two riot-dressed sentries were apparently talking quietly together. Down at the other end activity seemed to be minimal. The platoon that had been marching across the wide space had been dismissed to take a break and had begun to sit themselves down on the ground or up on a low wall. Perhaps that lucky plane was working for them.

He turned back to the paper, taking a long drink from a bottle of water Marigold had handed him.

Time to speak out against the idea that pornography can be a good thing. No, not Marigold. Though she might have her ideas on that subject, and perhaps they would be as simply trenchant as the other comments she had made. But he turned a page. There had been a sale due at Christie's: a phonograph doll was illustrated from a collection of 'Ceramics and Works of Art'. And Sotheby's had been offering 'Oak furniture, treen, fire insurance marks, pewter and metalwork'.

And people had paid money for such things. A lot of money when there had been money, however inflation puffy.

He turned a few pages in a clump. There were fragments missing from their edges, not torn away but fallen off.

‘ “*Britain steadily deserting bus and train services*” he offered.

‘Well, we know they did that, don’t we? An’ look where it got’em. Them jams. There all night in their cars. Bleeding idiots.’

‘Yes.’

There was an item headed *Poison Gas Evacuation*, but he decided that Marigold’s comment on the unthinking rush to car ownership could be applied as well more or less to factories for manufacturing dangerous substances placed near centres of population. He looked for something else.

Ah, this might be up her street. *Shopping*. He read the first item on the page that caught his eye.

‘ “At Harrods until August 7, an exclusive free gift for men. Aramis 900 is a pale blue pochette toilet bag. The gift includes Herbal After Shave, Hair Conditioner and either Daily Shampoo I, for normal to oily hair, or Daily II, for normal to dry hair. Free to any customer who buys two products or more from the Aramis 900 range.” ’

Marigold gave a hoot of a laugh.

‘We could do with some o’ that, couldn’t we?’ she said. ‘We don’t half pong, the pair of us.’

Smell? Well, yes, he must do. Washing without soap for so long could not have helped, and he had hated the stink of soap-boiling so much he had made the stuff as infrequently as possible. And since leaving home he must have added considerably to the body odour with which he had set out. Still, better to pong a bit, even more than a bit, than to be a slave to Daily Shampoo I or Daily Shampoo II.

He tried another item.

‘ “Could you fancy your man in a smock? Or yourself for that matter since their appeal is uni-sexual? Part of the hand-crafted, back to natural living trend ...” ’

Well, they had got back to natural living now all right. And without dressing up in smocks. But it was hardly a way

of life he would have embraced voluntarily.

He popped another sliver of the meat into his mouth and flicked up to the head of the column.

‘ “I never wear a watch,” ’ he read out, through his munching, ‘ “partly because I am convinced I know exactly what the time is anyway, and partly because I suffer from the delusion that it is possible to be in two places at once (i.e. spreadeagled in the garden in my bathing suit, and lipsticked and gowned for an important lunch) and wearing a watch would merely undermine my happy, optimistic nature. But I do love toys so I have been wearing a digital watch which Debenhams have put out at a very good price.” ’

He had to stop. Marigold, looking perched up on the parapet like a little Chinese doll with her thatch of grey hair, was laughing so loudly that he was afraid she would attract attention from either one end of the bridge or the other.

‘Well, yes,’ he said to her, ‘it does seem funny now.’

He took another slippery handful of the dark meat and chewed at it till the full violence of her mirth had subsided.

‘Go on,’ she said at last. ‘Give us some more o’ that.’

‘Well, all right. But please, Marigold, don’t laugh so much or they’ll come to see what it’s all about.’

He gulped down the last of his large mouthful.

‘What is this we’re eating?’ he asked. ‘It’s very good. Is it pigeon?’

She gave him a quick glance out of the corner of her eye.

‘It’s rat,’ she said. ‘Catch ‘em and smoke ‘em, I do. Barter ‘em too, only I kids on then it’s rabbit.’

Nausea rose up in him like a piston. In an instant he was covered all over in a light sweat. With the curious practicality of moments of physical crisis, he swung round so as to vomit, if he did, into the swiftly running, light brown Thames below. But people had eaten rats before, he reminded himself. In the siege of Paris. What trivial items

the mind stored. Well, no doubt they were a dangerous diet, but he lived in an envelope of danger after all.

‘You won’t be wanting any more then,’ Marigold said when he swung round again.

‘No. I was hungry all right. And that’s done me good. But no more, thank you.’

‘Then I s’pose we’d best be getting on. I dare say we made ourselves look mad enough to please anybody.’

He slipped down from the parapet. Had they established enough of an air of harmless lunacy? If any of the men down at the far end had seen them, had they been convinced?

And, if they did get by, how long now till he would be seeing Jasmine? Would he really be in time? He should be. If all went totally well, he would be. And with more than a bit to spare. If all went totally well.

Marigold had neatly wrapped the remaining rat pieces in *The Times* that had given her so much cheerful entertainment and had put the packet inside the shopper basket. Now she set off again, heading for the centre of the wide empty bridge, trotting at her customary brisk pace, only wandering the squeaky shopper from side to side more than when there had been no soldiers to see them.

Looking between sweeps of his falling hair – no need yet to start the mad mumbling – he saw that the platoon taking a break on the ground or up on the broken brick wall that had once formed the outer boundary of the big cold-store beside the bridge were still contentedly talking and joking among themselves. A shout of laughter came floating across.

But they were men at liberty to look around. Would one of them, seeing two civilians coming over the guarded bridge, take it into his head to investigate? Out of a sense of duty? Or seeing a chance to do a little happy bullying?

That seemed to be the real danger. The tanks and scout cars, so far as he could make out, were unmanned with only one guard standing stiffly beside them.

But would another patrol come at any moment marching out of the dark arch of the viaduct? Those lay on their route, too, so what if as they went through they met an officer coming the other way? The one who had been having his breakfast?

But, wandering and weaving, they had reached the very end of the bridge. Scattered across the wide roadway were the remains of the light metal pedestrian overbridge he remembered. The torn and twisted metal, though crushed where the tanks had rolled over it, was not easy to get past. But Marigold hoisted up the shopper and picked her way, even singing a cracked tuneless song, and he in his turn got through too, muttering away now as hard as he could go.

'Death to the French. Death to the French. Curses on thee, Spanish jade.'

And they were over. They were off the bridge. They had crossed the River.

At least they had crossed the River, whatever happened to them.

And the River marked half of his journey. More than half by a good deal, if he was measuring the distance in strictly arithmetical miles. It was now no more than two or three hours' hard walking to Wimbledon, if he could follow a straight route and if nothing happened to delay him. Two or three hours only, and Jasmine there waiting for him, her rich and greedy prettiness gone, dying, thin, but waiting. Waiting still well buoyed up by oily Tommy's costly stuff. Waiting for the sight of his face, the touch of his hand, the sound of his voice.

But saying what?

Ahead the dark arches under the viaduct were tantalisingly near now. No one at all seemed to be paying

them the least attention. And, so far as he could make out, no one was coming through in the darkness to meet them.

Abruptly another thought came into his mind. Now that he was across the River, he would never go back to the Highgate house again.

True, he might be able to bluff his way across in the same way as Marigold had bluffed their way over. But he did not want to. The risk, and all the other risks, were not worth it just to take up again a niche in a cold damp barricaded house which in the days when houses had belonged to people, when people had owned more property than they could keep about their persons and fight to hold, had been his. No, he did not want to go back there. To Mayfair and Mozart perhaps, but not to Highgate.

He shook his head at the discovery.

In the little group of idling soldiers just behind them he saw a man rise abruptly to his feet.

He looked quickly at Marigold beside him. Had she noticed? Would it be best to make a dash for the darkness of the arch ahead?

The man seemed to be coming towards them. Walking with purpose.

Marigold was keeping the same pace, brisk enough, but wandering. Would her mad act be enough to save them again? What if this fellow was not the friendly sort they had met at the other end of the bridge?

They could be marched to some camp in less than two minutes. They might even, in a crude joke, be bundled over the river wall down into that swift-flowing brown water.

'Marigold?' he said urgently.

She paid no attention. He swung his head and looked back at the soldier.

The fellow had stopped. He had just turned the corner of the low wall he had been sitting on earlier and he was

hauling up the bottom edge of his battle-blouse. Taking a pee.

That high-flying droning plane had been a good omen.

He looked ahead to the arches of the viaduct. But it seemed that Marigold, in her wandering course, was taking them off the line that would lead through the wide central arch. Had she seen something in the dark there? That breakfasting officer?

No. This near, it was plain that there was no one there.

‘Marigold, why aren’t we going by the roadway?’

‘Don’t want to. Want to go by the side. Nice little way there. Marigold likes it.’

Was there a zebra to cross or something? Well, anyway, trust her.

The arch she was making for was very much narrower than the one that took the roadway under the viaduct. It had evidently been simply a path for pedestrians. Soon he saw that over the years it had got more than half filled with rubbish, long since coagulated into one slimy mound with only here and there isolated objects sticking up from the greeny-dark mass, pieces of indestructible bright polythene, bottles, the loop of a motor-tyre, the melting shape of an old armchair.

As he entered behind Marigold the clawing stink that assailed him brought back his experience on the path leading down from the Archway Bridge. Long ago now it seemed.

‘Marigold,’ he called out, remonstratively.

But she ignored him. Murmuring happily to herself, the shopper trailing now behind her, she picked her way up the slowly rising mound. He followed, his feet slipping and sliding. The low roof, blackened and shining damp, was soon so close that he had to stoop. The smell brought up from his lungs a fierce protesting cough.

‘Marigold.’

‘Nice this way.’

And she trotted onwards. At the mound’s top, where he saw that he would have to bend nearly double, the globous eye of an ancient clothes-washer peered down at them, just catching the daylight from behind. Beside it a cat appeared, spitting arched defiance.

Marigold stopped and with a great amount of puss-pussing tried to induce it to come to her. But here even her powers failed and with a last curse the gone-wild creature turned and vanished. Marigold trudged her way to the top and then began to descend the far slope. He followed, sweaty and angry.

Why had she done it? Why had she insisted on this cramped darkness?

At last, slipping and slithering, they came out into the day and the sunlight again.

He thought about demanding an explanation from her. There had been no reason for the detour as far as he could see, not even the excuse of putting a zebra in their way to cross. But a look at her dreamily contented face told him that, whatever question he might put, it would get no answer that he could understand.

She was mad. That was it. And though at times her madness had helped him, it could not always be expected to do so.

He began to think once more of parting from her.

Then, as he followed her and the once again merrily squeaking shopper, there did come a zebra where it was sensible to cross. He caught up with her and they went over it side by side.

Would it help their luck to hold? There had been the plane, too. Things must be going to go well.

At the far end of the road which they had crossed he recognised, though he had never been a cricket fan, the high brick stadium walls of the Oval.

But up on them, he saw at the same moment, ominously silhouetted, there were more soldiers, the short barrels of their automatic rifles clearly to be seen against a background of white boarding. And on the tall flagpost over the old pavilion a bright pennant was flying briskly in the morning breeze.

‘Yes,’ Marigold said, seeing what he was looking at, ‘that’ll be Army all right. It’ll be one o’ their places.’

‘Places?’

‘Places. That’s what I calls ‘em. Don’t know what they likes to say they are. Camps, I think. Camps. But whatever they say they means prison.’

Yet, for all the hatred of being confined that she had shown, she kept trotting onwards. He went with her, but with doubt now billowing up higher and higher with every step.

Up on a wall to their right a painted noticeboard, survivor of countless storms, saved from a firewood fate only by having been put up so high, proclaimed ‘Luxury Flats Two Only Remaining.’ Shouldn’t they slip into the empty derelict block and try to work their way round behind, out of sight?

He put the idea to Marigold, vainly trying to make her stop. Anger began to shoot jabbing rays through his mind.

‘They’ll pick us up,’ he shouted, gesturing down towards the soldiers. ‘For nothing. For no reason. You’ll see.’

But her only reply was to echo exaggeratedly his furious gesture as she trotted along. His anger increased. To have entrusted himself to such a creature. It had been folly, sheer folly.

‘Stop,’ he yelled.

She did at least halt.

‘Listen,’ he said, forcing himself to be calm. ‘Listen, Marigold, you’ve been very helpful to me. I admit that. But I’m afraid I must exercise my own judgment here. If this is the edge of the military area, then I’m going to go back as

far as the river and then get round by Lambeth somehow, the way that sentry advised. Do you understand? I'm going to take a long, long way round to Wimbledon. I can do it. Even if I'll only just be in time. But I'm not going to risk being arrested.'

He thought of the burnt desert of Lambeth Marigold had described to the sentries. But he could get through that. He must. And, if it was all a blackened barrenness, then at least there would be no troops there.

'Billy boy, Billy boy,' Marigold said, looking him up and down. 'Not safe to be out, you ain't. Not safe at all.'

'Well, goodbye, Marigold,' he answered, loudly and clearly. 'Goodbye and thank you.'

She put her arms akimbo on the thick ceremonial cording that held together her chop-ended old mackintosh.

'You trust your Auntie Marigold,' she said. 'You trust her, an' don't go waving an' shouting an' making them soldiers come down this way. You trust Marigold, an' she'll have you in Wimbledon faster than you ever thought.'

It was a nonsensical claim. He almost swung on his heel and marched straight off. Only, partly Marigold's warning about not attracting the soldiers' attention deterred him, and partly he did not want to leave her on bad terms.

'So you just come along o' me '

And off she went again, calmly as ever - her burbling humming picked up again at once - and he found himself following.

He could not, as he tramped along behind her, think why he was letting her lead him. She was mad. He was a rational being. It was absurd, however many times she had been right about the dangers they had encountered.

But she was leading him, and he was following.

Hastily he began his mad-act chanting once more. The soldiers ahead were not so far away.

Would they get past this lot as easily as they had got past the sentries on the bridge and the men by the viaduct? He doubted it. He very much doubted it. The Oval was a military prison, even if it was on the edge of the Army-occupied area. Probably, in fact, it had been chosen because it was on the perimeter, close to where troublemakers would be picked up. Troublemakers like themselves.

But, as they got a little nearer, he saw that not everyone round the walls of the Oval was a soldier. Marigold had an argument on her side in the shape of a handful of civilians mingling with the troops, an old woman hawking round a plastic bucket of scrubby little apples, three laughing girls there for the usual reason and, even more of a reassuring sign, half a dozen children. He was reminded of old television news pictures of armed troops and going-about-their-business civilians side by side on the streets of Belfast. Perhaps it meant that it was not as dangerous here as he had feared. Perhaps they would get through.

‘Death to the French. Curses on thee, Spanish jade. *Le coeur a ses raisons*. Awake, for morning in the bowl of night hath flung the stone that puts the stars to flight.’

No one seemed to be paying them particular attention, though a good many people glanced up at the sound of the savage squeaking of the shopper.

Why hadn’t he found something oily to stop it? Or was the noise, in fact, a good thing? Only someone absolutely simple in the head would endure it for hour after hour.

‘Wife, wife, bane of my life. Death to the French. Awake, for morning in the bowl of night ...’

They were already almost half-way round the road encircling the stadium. The Surrey Tavern, the pub that had used to serve the cricket crowd, had come into view, the letters of its name, all there bar the first ‘S’, still standing

out boldly, white on red. The place now seemed to be a canteen for the troops.

‘Death to the French. Death to the French.’

Another squad of soldiers in column of threes came marching from round the far side, an officer beside them. Peering from under flopping hair, he saw the man momentarily hesitate looking straight in their direction. But the sound of rhythmically booted feet did not come to any sudden halt.

He shambled onwards, face still firmly to the ground, just able to see Marigold ahead of him. Tramp, tramp. Tramp, tramp. Mutter, mutter, mutter, mutter.

‘Here we are then.’

She had stopped. He looked up.

They were a fair way past the Oval, almost at the large intersection just south of it, evidently another of the places where people congregated. There were some twenty or more of them, mostly busy over the always long-drawn business of barter, one or two sitting talking on the steps of the warm golden-stone church that overlooked the open space. A knot of men outside the old Oval Underground station were playing some sort of gambling game, using old coins as tokens.

And it was the Underground station, its yellow tiled walls flecked with little black dots still in a good state of repair, that Marigold had pointed out. But why? Why the Underground?

‘Marigold,’ he asked, still sharply, ‘where are you trying to take me?’

She turned her head to answer, though only just.

‘We’re going where you want. To Wimbledon. By Tube. All the way. Quick as you like.’

Part Ten

Mad. Marigold was, of course, mad. Yet wasn't this idea of getting to Wimbledon by Tube carrying her madness into a new dimension? Up to now she had simply had her own characteristic way of looking at things, sometimes merely a little odd like the notion of zebra crossings and single aircraft bringing luck, sometimes mysteriously shrewd like some of her comments on the long-ago life in *The Times* or her method of getting past the soldiers. But when the ordinary logic of life had broken down it was understandable that madness should sometimes be topsy-turvily effective. Yet now surely she had slipped into a wholly lunatic fantasy.

What could she actually be intending to do? To try to walk along the abandoned railway line deep underneath them, pitch-dark and unknown for mile upon mile? Or was she even further into a world of fantasy and would she just sit in the dark and pretend to herself, and him, that they were going to Wimbledon?

He felt a sudden yearning concern for her. She had helped him. No, more, despite her infuriating way at times, he liked her. Yes, he liked her, mad though she was. And now she had gone beyond him.

He must certainly stay with her for a little longer, see if he could somehow straighten things out.

She made her way directly over to the station entrance, a tiny determined untidy figure. He followed. There were yet more people inside the old ticket hall, family groups with children, some of them dancing round in a circle holding hands and singing. Like a folk-song collector coming across a prized rarity, he recognised the tune. It had been a TV jingle at the time the commercial service had closed down, though the name of the product it had advertised had become distorted past disentangling.

But Marigold did not linger. Squeak, squeak went the shopper over to the long-stilled escalators. There she shouldered the basket – he felt the cessation of sound as a positive blessing – and marched away down the unmoving moving stair into the gradually increasing darkness.

But before it had got quite black a faint orangey light began to appear from below, getting slowly brighter as they descended.

When at the bottom they crossed the landing and walked on to one of the two platforms its source became apparent. Candles and lanterns, as many as three dozen in all, were dotted along the whole length of the platform and a small community was evidently encamped there, family clusters that reminded him at once of the ‘praying knees’ at the baths in Kentish Town. The two places even sounded a little alike. Here there was not quite the tingling resonance of that night of ritualised hymn-singing, but the confined space and smooth tunnel walls did give the muted and sparse talk he heard – somewhere further along a child was monotonously crying – a distinctive timbre.

And, he realised as he anxiously followed Marigold along the platform’s length, there was a characteristic smell too. The sour odour of long human habitation in a cramped space, body stink, urine stink, old clothes stink. It came back to him then, clearly as if he was pacing this very platform waiting for a train to whisk him along to South

Wimbledon, the smell he would have had in his nostrils then, the faint sooty bitterness of impacted dust marginally disturbed. He could remember it exactly.

Trains, those frequent trains on the Underground, moderately frequent even when the service had begun to suffer from lack of manpower when car factory jobs paid much more than a public service could find – their very existence, he thought, summed up all that city life had been before. Getting rapidly from suburbs to centre had been an essential of its being. They had been right to call the Paris underground the Métro – Paris, were things as bad there as they were here? – since swift internal travel was metro-polaneity itself. The millions drawn together in minute complexities of divided and sub-divided mutually dependent occupations had needed such mobility almost as much as they had needed to breathe, and breathing had often been trouble enough up in the streets towards the end. To go to jobs, to cinemas, theatres, football matches, concerts, the bright lights, meetings, courses and classes: the whole complex of the Underground spelt city life, for worse or for better. Spelt it and smelt it, with that characteristic, just remembered, faintly sooty odour.

Replaced in his nostrils at this moment by brutal basic human stink. The smell of timidity in hiding.

But, it dawned on him, if there were people down here it was after all at least possible that anybody could walk from one station to the next along the tunnels. It might even be the quickest way of getting to Wimbledon if the Army was spread out in strength in the whole area south of the River.

Perhaps, again, the mad way was the best way.

‘Hello, Old Marigold.’

A woman had hailed her, loudly and cheerfully, from among the huddled groups they had been passing as they had made their way along the edge of the platform in a procession of two, the shopper shrilling out in front of them

like a stuck-record blackbird. She was a stout creature of sixty or so, sitting propped against the rear wall, her gross red cheeks contrasting sharply in the light of a lantern with the whiteness of the wan faces all around her.

Marigold halted.

‘Hello, dear,’ she called. ‘You still here then?’

‘It’s me legs,’ the stout woman shouted back. ‘Look at ‘em. All swolled up like balloons. Can’t walk more nor twenty yards, or I’d of been out of this here old hidey-hole long ago.’

Marigold bent down to the shopper and began to rummage inside it.

‘Here,’ she called out. ‘Got something as might do you a bit o’ good.’

She produced one of her boxes, a smallish cardboard one much rubbed at the edges. But immediately he recognised the bold design printed on it. It had been something Jasmine had had. An exactly similar box had stood on the bathroom shelf for months and months, abandoned after a first enthusiasm. It had been some slimming stuff. Or had it been tanning stuff, sun-tanning stuff? Whichever it was, the plastic bottle in the cardboard box had been designed with a large hole in its centre ingeniously increasing its apparent size while reducing the actual contents. And it had been hellishly expensive.

Marigold carefully opened the top flap and tipped on to her cracked and skinny palm a small shower of pieces of dried leaf.

‘Boil ‘em up and drink it down,’ she said, going over to her acquaintance and transferring the fragments to her. ‘I don’t promise nothing, mind, but it may get you on your feet again, girl.’

She cut off the stout woman’s cheerful thanks.

‘Got to be getting along, see. Taking this feller to Wimbledon, got to see his wife what’s dying.’

He felt a jab of shock at this crude announcement of his predicament. Or, he realised, he had felt that he ought to have been shocked. Because he had not been, only surprised. He tried to work out why. Was it because privacy had been gone so long, was one of the lost luxuries of civilisation? Or even because individuality, the right to personal sorrows, had gone? Neither seemed quite right.

No, he decided, as if the revelation was still slowly flowering inside him, it was simply because of this liking for Marigold which he had discovered in himself. She had said what she had in a spirit of pure goodwill. And he accepted it. He accepted her liking for him, and that it had created in him an equal liking for her – was ‘liking’ too weak a word? – however deranged her mind might be.

They reached the far end of the platform. Marigold, without a word, lowered the shopper into the track pit, turned and slipped down after it. Then with a bright ‘Upsy-daisy’ she lifted the basket to plank its thin axle down on the ‘live’ rail in the centre of the pit.

He was unable to keep back a gasp as he saw the axle descend. He actually expected to see a great bluish flash as so many thousand volts passed through the shopper and into Marigold.

But a moment later he smiled at his own ridiculousness. The smooth rail, though it was no longer steel-burnished as it had been in the days when at five-minute intervals it had been brushed by the pick-up arm of trains, was now simply a convenient place to rest the shopper on. Dead as metal anywhere. Marigold was perfectly right to make use of it.

‘Come along then.’

From the platform edge he looked into the tunnel ahead. The dim lights of the lanterns and candles scarcely penetrated its blackness at all. He could see its floor for two or three yards, a level surface of neat regular-sized chunky pebbles all covered in the same sooty brownness. On the

circular walls he could make out the dozen or so pipes and cables that had played their parts in the running of the system years before, disappearing equally into the dark. A single white plastic-covered wire penetrated a yard deeper perhaps before it too was lost to sight. But that was all.

The blackness looked impenetrable. Was Marigold not even going to light one of her stubs of candle?

Yet from her familiarity with the stout and cheery cripple it was plain she had travelled this way often before. Trust her then. Trust her.

He scrambled awkwardly down on to the track. Marigold, as soon as she had seen he was coming, had marched off into the black. He plunged in in his turn.

For the first hundred yards or so, while there was still some light coming from the platform behind him, the going seemed almost impossible. At every step he felt constrained to check and peer ahead into the darkness, despite Marigold's tiny figure plodding away unhesitatingly in front of him. He could make out only with difficulty where he was putting each foot and could not rid himself of the idea that at any instant he would topple forward helplessly into some unseen trap. But, curiously, as soon as a slight curve in the tunnel had blotted out the last vestiges of light and he was deprived even of the minimal reassurance he had been getting from the glint on the white plastic wire at his side, he began to make better progress.

In front now he could hear, above the noise of Marigold's light footsteps crunching on the pebbles, a continuous whiny sizzling sound from the scraping of the shopper's axle on the dead 'live' rail. And he found, no longer attempting to rely on his eyes, that he was walking a great deal more confidently, though each step was short and he imagined they could not be progressing at much more than a couple of miles an hour.

He began trying to calculate how long at that rate it was going to take to get to South Wimbledon station.

But he had to give up. He found he had no idea, comparing this walk with trips to Wimbledon by car, or even visits by Tube along this very line, just what the distances involved were. Yet it did not matter that he could produce no result to his sum. He was going steadily forward, short step by short step, and surely still he had time in hand.

Then another reassuring sound came to his ears. Marigold started to hum and chirrup in her old way once again. He felt a quick corresponding lightening in his own spirits.

And before long he realised that Marigold's burblings down here were a good deal more coherent than they had been before, up in the light. Or was it that he was paying them more attention, cut off in the dark? He thought not. No, she sounded distinctly more at ease here.

She must like this darkness then. Like all dark places, with her insistence on going through that almost murky tunnel under the Vauxhall viaduct. She must be a creature of underground secret places.

And this discovery, too, was oddly reassuring.

He listened with yet greater care.

'... that great ball thing o' theirs, swinging and bashing. An' it was a nice place, that was. Comfy. An' what they put up after. Great block o' flats. No better than where Old Credit Cards lived. That's what I called him, Old Credit Cards. Old Credit Cards. Cor, he'd of paid me with one o' them, if I'd let him. Me, going round to a bank in me overall. "Please sir, Mr James put his little number on this piece o' paper, an' are you going to give me seven-and-six an hour?" '

This mental picture, whatever exactly it was of, evidently so amused her that she chuckled away to herself for two or

three dozen lightly crunching steps in the blackness, with the tiny hiss of the shopper's axle unfaltering on its rail.

She must, he hazarded, have once had a job as a daily cleaner. In the long ago. And she must have lived in a house that had been demolished. Well, there had been enough of those in the days of new, new, new.

'Puff, puff, puff, puff. You're a silly old Jim all right. I told you, didn't I? An' the Doc. He told you. Bronchitis, he said. An' that time in Spain. Spain, cor, fancy you an' me in Spain. I said to you then ... Well, an' he was always off there, an' to the South o' France, old Jabez. The Canary Islands. Fairy canary. Yeh, that's what he was, young Jabez, fairy canary. Jabez. What a name, eh? What a name. An' up on all them posters. Used to make me feel proper silly on me way there. Jabez.'

Jabez. The name rang a bell for him too. A bell that had once shrieked horribly painfully in his head. Jabez, a pop star of some sort, and Jasmine caught up in his come-and-gone bright-flaring meteor wake. Jasmine in her narrow bed now with the flowered headboard, gaunt, unrecognisable, a skeleton animated by a puffed-up fire. Jasmine who had lived that escalating sweep of grabbed enjoyment. New friends, new jobs, new cars, new parties, new places to go, new drugs, new lovers, new ways of love.

What would he say to her? Soon now. Not 'I forgive you, Jasmine.' Not Mrs Brillings's tidy ending. That was certain. To forgive was to condone. And he did not condone that life. He did not.

'But, Jim, I says, Jim, what's the use o' coming to Sunny Spain if all you does is puff, puff, puff. An' it done for him in the end, done for him, done for him.'

For several minutes - or what seemed like several minutes since the eye-masking dark dissolved time into a formless fluid - she went on and on repeating that 'Done for him'. Done for whom, he asked himself. And at once he

knew the answer. Her husband. She had of course been married. He knew it clearly as if he had met the fellow. Jim. Yes, Marigold had been married to Jim and had been left a widow when he had died from, yes, bronchitis, from too much smoking.

Then, suddenly, pricking like a needle thrust, light somewhere far ahead. He stumbled and cursed.

‘It’s all right, dearie. Only Stockwell Station coming up.’

Well, they had been plodding along for what had seemed hours. It was only to be expected that they would reach the next station eventually. Yet he felt too that far from plodding for hours they were making almost dizzyingly fast progress.

His heart began to thud. From the fossil layers of memory he dug the names of the stations still to be passed by. Soon Stock-well, then Clapham North, Clapham Common, Clapham South, then Balham – Balham where poor Dr Satpathi had hoped to set up as a village storyteller – then Tooting Bec and Tooting Broadway and Colliers Wood. And then it would be South Wimbledon. The distance to the house was measurable.

Yes, Marigold had been right indeed. Down here in the dark was the way to make good speed.

Stockwell Station, when they came to it, was much as the Oval had been, except that its platform was on the other side of the track. But there were more dim lights on it, and huddled clumps of cringeing, almost silent refugees. This time Marigold recognised no one, although she seemed to be recognised, or at least accounted for, by such of the pale apathetic faces that glanced at them as they went by.

In three minutes they were in the dark again. The now friendly dark. And the shopper was hissing its way ahead along the dead live rail.

As soon as the last trace of light had disappeared behind them Marigold began humming and chirruping once more.

He felt the sound like a warm coat draped round his shoulders.

'Saturdays an' that telly. Oh, lord. Checking his points for his old pools from the football results. Poor old Jim. Thinking he was going to live the different life. Different, cor. Parties. All you could think of to drink, an' the next morning ... "Mr Jabez", I says, "star you may be, but when it's naked bodies all over the lounge and that mixed up there's no telling what from what ..." Ah, well, not the first time Old Marigold got the sack. But it weren't their fault, not really. Not with the way things were. Cor, all them posters everywhere, naked bitches left an' right. An' the films, an' the clothes, showing off all they'd got. Shops full of 'em too. An' them TV ads. Cigars, they said. Sex, I said, sex an' no mistake. In the papers too, every day showing their tits for all to see. No wonder. No wonder, eh? An' them books an' magazines. Couldn't go nowhere to buy a bag o' sweets without you saw 'em. Sticking out their arses at you. No wonder. An' models. "Mr James," I said, "model she may be but I knows the word for her an' it's whore." Poor Marigold, the sack again. An' not a penny from Old Credit Cards.'

A lot of it he was not able to make out at all. Yes, she must have worked as a cleaning woman not only for Jabez but for someone who was apt to forget to pay her. But Jabez, what an extraordinary coincidence. Why, she might even have met Jasmine. Or have seen her. Naked bodies all over the lounge.

Only the sheer energy of Marigold's unceasing monologue hauled him away from sombre, biting thoughts.

'Tranqs an' peps. Tranqs an' peps. That's what I used to call 'em. Tranqs an' peps' - that was the Jasmine life again, all right - 'An' half the time he didn't know which was which, our Jabez. Mucking about with your head. Stupid. Stupid. Well, they wasn't going to do that to Old Marigold, much as they'd of liked to make me into one o' their

zombies. All down the High Street in me white nightie. Doctor, you must be mad, I said. Mad. Oh dear.'

And she laughed till the confining tunnel echoed and echoed with merriment.

It was infectious. He realised that now he was feeling happier than he had felt for years. Happier here, down in the inky darkness tramping along, tired as he was and achingly bruised, in the wake of a madwoman, he was feeling happier than he had done at any time since the bad times had come.

He thought of her, all down the High Street in her white nightie, escaping from the mad plan of those sane doctors, that wild craze for quick answers, those quick operations that had made the zombies, those formerly violent men, and apparently women too, turned into convenient walking puddings.

But dangerous puddings somehow still, surely. He had always taken good care to steer well clear when he had seen any of them.

On and on they went. Marigold's voice sometimes fell into mere humming, sometimes repeated almost exactly what he had heard her say before. Clapham North Station came up out of the dark, little different from Stockwell except that here the two lines that had taken trains southwards and northwards linked together with the platform in between them. But soon they were in their own dark tunnel once more. And then after another long, long time of walking it was Clapham Common, again a platform between the two lines.

He wondered, while they walked past the refugees here, whether up above there were dogs roaming the common as Marigold had warned him there might be. Or was there an Army camp there, lines and lines of camouflaged tents laid out in a strictly orderly fashion?

And again the dark.

Clapham South, when they came to it, was, for no particular reason that he could make out, deserted. They could in fact tell they were going through a station only by the comparative airiness, this time, on their right-hand side. Perhaps up on the surface the dangers that had driven people in the districts nearer the centre to take refuge no longer existed. Or perhaps the Army had succeeded in creating a sort of peace.

So at South Wimbledon would there be no danger? Was the last short part of his long walk going to turn out to be simply easy?

But first to get that far.

On through the darkness. Marigold talking. Marigold humming. Marigold talking.

Nothing checked the flow, not even a section of the track alive with squealing, scuttling rats.

'They likes it hereabouts,' she said when he exclaimed at them. 'Don't know why. But they been here a long time. They won't do you no harm.'

And they did not. After that first hesitation he simply put his trust in what Marigold had said and walked straight through them. To begin with he did expect to put a foot on a squirming body at each step, or feel a sharp poisonous bite at his ankle, but soon he became perfectly used to them, picking up his coat of happiness again well before they had got beyond the creatures' domain.

It was odd. Odd.

Balham, too, proved uninhabited. He thought again about Dr Satpathi as they made their way along beside its pitch-dark platform. If he had been there now, this would have been where they would have parted. And he himself would have been about to journey on enriched by, not the five or six tales the little Indian had told him, but by dozens. Yet even the few he had were an abundant legacy. Together they gave him a promise that survival was possible,

something he had been by no means sure of when he had set out. And it was a promise that had been in no way rendered null by those three reverberating pistol shots. No, human beings, he knew now, were wonderful keepers-going. Nothing was quite too bad for them. Nothing.

He had learnt that from Dr Satpathi, and from hope-fired spring-leaping Penny, even from those two young lovers he had seen at Mornington Crescent making an arch of their arms over the grumpy old woman going to fetch water. Nothing was quite too bad. Nothing.

Then, one by one the final stations in his list came up, each separated from the one before by a long spell of blackness and of Marigold's burbling voice. Tooting Bec. Tooting Broadway. And, soon, Colliers Wood.

And the next one after that would be South Wimbledon. And then into the light of day, and that familiar, familiar walk from the station along Merton High Street.

What would that look like now? Heaped ruins? Or still much as it had been, but three-parts deserted? Or would it be like Mayfair, an oasis of deep silence? Or like Lambeth, burnt to a charred desert?

And the house? When he came to the house, how would that look? That table-top front garden? That pale yellow front door, would the hammered-glass panels of that be still intact, its dinky plastic bell-push with the little picture of a church-bell where you put your finger still operative, the lantern in the cupboard-like porch still have its thick blobs of coloured glass in place, though doubly useless now? And when Mrs Brillling opened the door, what would she have to say to him? That Jasmine after all was dead?

What time was it? What time was it? But it could not be even near midday yet. There was no possibility of that. There would be three hours to go, or two. Two at the very least. And the house was not ten minutes' walk from South Wimbledon Station.

Then, once more, ahead in the impenetrable dark a pinpoint of light broke through, tiny but afflicting the eyes.

‘There are people at Colliers Wood,’ he said to Marigold, an inexplicable stir of anxiety snickering through him.

If, he had reasoned, the world up above was safer because no one needed to take refuge in the whole stretch between Clapham South and Tooting Broadway, then that tiny light-glim ahead meant that here at Colliers Wood there was something above not so safe.

He remembered the lie of the land there, the small unpretentious station with opposite it a huge office block, charcoal-grey in colour, seventeen or eighteen storeys high, bee-busy in the old days with whatever work was done there, something in the interlaced multi-faceted pattern. What would there be round there? Wandering predators? Dogs? Another half-mad giant like the window-cleaner terrorising the whole area for fun? A truck-load of Happies zooming here and there, carelessly knocking down whoever they happened to come across?

‘Yes, ‘course there are people at the station,’ Marigold said. ‘Wouldn’t be no lights there if there wasn’t. Stands to reason.’

‘Yes,’ he answered, once more just putting his trust in her, though reflecting that reason was exactly what it did not stand to.

It took them another full five minutes before the light that had been such a pinpoint when it had first pricked at his eyes had widened to become no more than a dim orangey illumination at the far end of the station’s platform.

Partially blocking the wavering glow – it was clear now that it came not from lanterns or candles but from a small fire at the very far end – were the outlines of several men. Hard to tell in the distance, but it looked as if there might be half a dozen of them.

One, as they got a little nearer and presumably a little noisier, rose up, turned and came towards them. A big fellow, moving slowly.

Marigold kept steadily on till they reached the beginning of the platform. Then she swung the shopper bodily across from its supporting rail over to the platform edge. With hardly a pause she set herself to scramble up beside it.

As he had done on each such occasion in the course of their long dark trip, he put his hands underneath her sharp little elbows and gave her a gentle heave. Otherwise, small as she was, getting up on to any of the platforms was a considerable physical feat. He clambered up beside her on to his knees and then pushed himself upright.

Turning, he realised in one stomach-sinking glance just what the balloon-like figure coming lumbering down towards them was.

He jabbered it out to Marigold. 'It's a zomby. A zomby.'

' 'Course he is, dearie. What you think he was?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, of course. He's a zomby.'

He was able then to look steadily at the oncoming figure. He was a very big fellow, as many of the zombies were, a full six-foot tall and very broad and fleshy. It was impossible to make out his face properly, though a halo of blond hair, curling and twisted, framed it. Yet there could be no doubt, just from his swaying drifting walk, as if he was filled with air, that he was a zomby. In the days when they had first been released after undergoing their operation and had had that cruel yet accurate name tagged on to them they had been so conspicuous that their characteristic bearing was stamped on the memory. A zomby. Someone shambling, loose-limbed, puffy-fleshed, simple-minded and not to be trusted.

But with Marigold beside him he felt no hesitation in going forward to encounter the swaying figure.

They met about half-way along the platform, peering at each other in the dim and flaring light from the distant little fire, its flames sending big shadows rising and falling across the rounded wall of the tunnel, lighting up at instants different parts of the tattered remains of the posters that had been there since the distant days when there had been goods to sell and people urgent to buy. A vast bronzed face puffing at a huge white cigarette. A half-glimpsed scene from a film, a naked man brandishing a vicious trident-like weapon. A family sheltering beneath a giant umbrella of insurance promises.

Insurance. The belief that there would be a future when past savings would be needed, would be available, would mean anything at all.

'Hello there,' he greeted the swinging-armed zombie, his features with the light behind them still difficult to see.

'Lo.'

He sounded neither friendly nor unfriendly. Merely responding.

'Just going through. On our way to Wimbledon.'

'Huh.'

But it was communication. One human being sending out a message to another and receiving a message back, if a muted one.

Then, moving with new swiftness, the zombie lurched rapidly towards him. He imagined in an instant his body held and carelessly crushed in huge over-muscled arms.

He recoiled.

But as quickly he checked himself. The move towards him had not been hostile. He had sensed it not to be. It had not been.

He stood and let the thick blunted-fingered hands come to rest on his sides. He smiled as slowly they pressed into him and began to slide downwards.

'What is it then, ducks? What you want then?'

Marigold's voice in the dimness beside him was bright and inquiring, and reassuring.

To both of them.

The zomby gave a grunt in answer to her. But it was not possible to tell just what it meant.

The paw hands continued their heavy caressingly searching movement.

'What is it then, ducks? Tell Old Marigold.'

The hands left his body. The zomby put one of them to his mouth again and again in a clumsy repeated gesture.

'You're hungry,' Mark said. 'Hungry, are you?'

He turned to Marigold.

'Can you spare some - ' For a moment he gagged. 'Can you spare some rat-meat?'

'Got more'n that,' she answered. 'Got a nice big bunch o' carrots. Found 'em growing just as I was going into the Palace yesterday. Old Buck'nim Palace.'

She went up to the zomby, peering into his face. Her head came only just above his middle.

'You come along into the light,' she said, in the same talking-to-a-pet voice she had used to him on more than one occasion. 'Got to have a bit o' light, see what I'm doing. You come along to the fire, eh?'

Huh.'

The big swollen-limbed fellow shambled round and set off towards the far end of the platform. Marigold followed, squeaking the shopper merrily.

The others round the little flaring fire - there were, he saw, four of them, big nodding-headed zombies all - stumbled to their feet as they came up. But it was not their presence that made the impact, enormous though each of them was and oddly similar though they looked with their ungainly bodies and the heavy growth of hair and beard

that was another of their traits. It was not their looming presence: it was the smell.

Ten yards from the fire it had become overwhelmingly apparent. The stink of excrement. And as they had got right up its cause became clear. The whole corner of the platform behind the little pile of flickeringly blazing wood had been used and used again. It was trodden and muddy as a pigsty, and much fouler smelling.

Marigold however seemed quite happy to put up with it. So he in his turn determined not so much to ignore it as to forget it.

In a few moments Marigold had unearthed from the shopper both the familiar bundle wrapped up in that copy of *The Times* and an ancient plastic carrier-bag – it had the word ‘London’ on it and a crude picture of Big Ben in a mixture of jazzy colours – from which she pulled in triumph a large bunch of carrots, their feathery tops still springy and fresh.

‘No, no, boys,’ she said sharply, as three or four ham-hands reached out. ‘You sit down nicely and Marigold’ll give you each a share.’

The hulking creatures obeyed like so many kindergarten girls. Marigold turned to him.

‘An’ you sit too,’ she said, as sharply.

He squatted at once between two of the balloony zombies. He had been expecting that Marigold would simply have given out the food and that then they would have left. But he found he was willing to accept her decision that they should not. And, even though he was aware at the back of his mind of every minute trickling away from the time that remained till Jasmine’s noon hour, he was still pleased to be joining in the impromptu meal. Besides, there was not all that much to eat. They could not be too long about it.

He took a carrot and munched at it happily, for all that he felt fragments of earth crunching between his teeth. But the

rat slivers he waved away, and Marigold did not insist.

It was a convivial occasion. The zombies chewed and grunted and belched and from time to time went into long peals of laughter till tears came into their eyes and rolled down their broad thick-featured faces, glinting in the firelight. And they nudged one another and nudged him – painfully heavy elbows – and looked at the tiny figure of Marigold, darting about serving them all, with the awed respectfulness of just-trained puppies. And he, too, laughed for no particular reason and poked happily back at the huge rib-cages of the two hunkered on either side of him. He felt euphoria bubbling softly through him. The heat of the fire was delicious after the dank chill of the black tunnels and, squatting as he was, the weight of his body no longer throbbed along his calves.

But soon the food was finished and he knew he must abandon this temporary refuge of contentment.

‘Marigold,’ he called to her above the grunting and the spasmodic soft undirected laughter.

‘Marigold, I’m sorry, but I think we ought to be making a start again.’

She came round to where he was and looked down at him.

‘It ain’t we,’ she said. ‘It ain’t we no more now.’

‘Marigold, what do you mean?’

But he knew.

‘You’re on your own now, Billy boy. Old Marigold’s going to stay here for a bit. We need some looking after here, we do. What a niff, eh? What a niff.’

‘Yes. But, Marigold ... But, Marigold, I need you too. I’d never have managed this far without you, I see that now.’

She gave a cackle of laughter.

‘ ‘Course you wouldn’t. Oh, the things you’d of done. Dogs as you’d of gone right up to. An’ people as you’d of run a mile from.’

He gave a quick glance to the squatting, gurgling laughing figures round.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ he said. ‘I would have run a mile. I did run miles before, from that window-cleaner fellow I told you about, and all the time he was swimming in the sea I was drowning in – I see that now. “Beats windows,” he said. Did I tell you that? “Beats windows this life” – and I ran from the arrack drunks, and there was no need, and from the Happies. From them, in a way, fastest of all. But I know better now, Marigold.’

‘ ‘Course you do. That’s why. That’s why, Billy boy. ‘Ere.’

She trotted over to her shopper and delved among its many jars and packages and parcels once again.

In a moment she had found what she wanted. She came back over to him and thrust out her skinny hands, cupped together.

In them lay a stub of candle, a good big thick one, and two matches, their clean wood white in the firelight.

‘You’ll want these,’ she said. ‘Getting up top at South Wimbledon.’

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Thank you, Marigold. Thank you for everything.’

A voice in his head told him how ridiculously like the words were to some vague party farewell from the old, old days. He heard Jasmine saying them. He had heard her saying almost those exact words hundreds of times in the days when they had gone to parties together. But deeper in him he knew that, for all the outward poverty of the phrase, it had told Marigold what he wanted to tell her.

Thank you for being what you are, it had conveyed to her. For showing me by being what you are that there is something more even than surviving to making one’s way through a world like the one above, danger-filled, unaccountable. That, though surviving is important and can be done – Dr Satpathi had pulled that dormant belief in him

to the light, taught it to him with his tales - there is something else as well. That he should never have clung as he had done, clung long, obstinately and hysterically, to what he had seen as a right certainty. That he had been mistaken, mightily, to have pushed away from him so frantically what he had seen as a wrong whirling mad uncertainty. Whirling, mad and uncertain it was, but it was not wholly to be rejected.

Mad Marigold had half the right of it.

He took the candle stub and put it quickly into the pocket of his burberry and then plucked one by one the two thin match-sticks from her gnarled palm.

She would have forgotten him in an hour or two, he guessed. Perhaps, if ever in some unlikely future they chanced to hit on one another again, she might recall who he was, as she had recognised the woman at the Oval Station with her legs 'all swolled up'. But unless they did happen to come into contact like that again he would be in her memory only one more of the floating fragments that would occasionally surface in her happy bubble of disconnected talk as she wandered through the vast ruin of the city. Poor Marigold: happy Marigold.

'Thank you,' he said again.

And then it came to him that now he knew, if only in a dim and half made-out way, what answer there was to the question which the sight of Jasmine dying would put before him.

Part Eleven

He entered the tunnel that would take him from Colliers Wood Station to South Wimbledon almost as unconcernedly as he had entered behind Marigold the last four or five tunnels on their long under-the-earth trek. There had been no obstacles in the darkness before, except that one easily passed area of scuttling squealing rats: he did not expect any obstacles in this final stretch. He positioned himself so that his right leg just came into contact with the dead live rail running down the centre of the tunnel and set out.

He found that the trustfulness he had inherited from Marigold was still valid. He had no hesitation at all in stepping into the sooty blackness. At every other short pace he felt the rail just brush his leg through his draped burberry. He progressed.

He felt free enough even to think. To marvel at the situation he had quite suddenly found himself in.

It had never occurred to him as he had made his way through the interminable hours of darkness that Marigold would not come with him right up to the little pebbledashed house, now not so far away. The times when he had plotted to part from her seemed distant as last year. He trusted her completely in the end. But, he found, he trusted her now yet more for having been dismissed by her. She had been right: somehow he was fit to be out on his own.

Now he knew what it was really like.

And this was the knowledge he was going to have with him when, soon enough after this moment, he would enter once again that little box of a house, walk up the stairs – the beige-coloured wallpaper with its pimples of silvery white there still no doubt as it had been for years, and the big reproduction painting in its broad curlicued golden frame at the turn whose subject he could never remember from one visit to the next – and would at last confront his dying ex-wife. What exact words he would say to her he did not know and felt no need to rehearse. They would depend on what she might say to him, just what she might ask of him, what, if it should turn out after all to be almost too late, she might ask of him perhaps with a look only. When the time came the words would come. They would not be the easy forgiveness Mrs Brillling expected, feeble agreement to regard the past as if it had not taken place. But they would not be either an iron condemnation, the condemnation he had carried with him like a heavy weapon, unwilling to acknowledge even to himself that he had it concealed about his person, all the way since he had walked through the tangled confusion of the garden in Highgate until – until, really, Mad Marigold had sent him off.

The rail at his right side brushed and brushed with steady regularity against his leg.

How far did he have to go down here till he got to South Wimbledon? He sent his mind back to the long-ago days when he had on occasion walked the length of Merton High Street from South Wimbledon Station back to Colliers Wood. Out with Jasmine looking for something or other that she had to have there and then from the shops, something new she had read about or seen advertised on television, some exotic ingredient for a Sunday-paper recipe seen the day before. It had been less than a mile. Really only half a mile even, or not a great deal more. But say it was a full mile,

and say he was walking now as slowly as only two miles an hour. Then half an hour, half an hour at most and he would be up on the surface again and within a few hundred yards of the house.

It would be over, his long walk.

He found – he was sure – that he had increased his pace. The flick, flick, flick of the rail against his leg, muffled by the double thickness of the burberry, was surely more rapid than it had been before.

At this rate he would complete the journey in twenty minutes. Or, say, a quarter of an hour from this moment.

And he was ready to complete it now. Ready.

There was nothing more to think about, and, somehow, he knew, nothing more in the way of danger to worry about. The refugees down at Colliers Wood Station had not after all been people hiding from some peril above, only poor simple-minded zombies who had chanced to drift there.

He was well into the station at South Wimbledon before he realised it. The darkness was so unbroken that it took him quite some time to sense that there on his right there was no longer the rounded wall of the narrow tunnel but the wider space of a platform.

When it broke in on him he halted for a moment, feeling an unquenchable flutter of excitement in his stomach. Then he turned and felt his way over to the platform. There, he sat on the edge and carefully fished out Marigold's thick candle stub. He brushed his hand over the surface beside him and decided it would be quite rough enough to strike a match on. Thank goodness, the crudish country-made sticks were not the safety matches of old.

A scrape. A flare.

The soft flame seemed intolerably harsh to his eyes, but though blinking and tearful he managed to get it to the wick of the candle and make sure that it had taken hold. Then he

shut his eyes and opened them again only cautiously some twenty or thirty seconds later.

The platform, as far as he could see, was deserted as an undiscovered cave, bare and empty. Again, as at Colliers Wood, a few peeling remains of the old posters showed up in the faint light of the candle. There was one of the ones that there had used to be for women's tights, all peas-in-a-pod alike, preter-naturally long legs flaunted sinuously. And he could make out quite close to him the words of the old Government warning on a cigarette advertisement, statutorily printed on the base of every poster extolling the carcinogenous and revenue-producing. And one more, ripped almost right away, was left simply proclaiming 'New'. Well, that had said it all.

He got carefully to his feet, stooped and picked up the candle stub between two fingers and, slowly so as not to blow its flame out, raised it until it gave him the maximum light.

Then he set off along the platform, remembering without having to think that the exit to the stairs was about two-thirds of the way along.

But, when he was within ten or fifteen yards of it, something caught his eye standing in the dead centre of the platform. It was an object about a foot or eighteen inches high, shaped like a fat vase, with a chunky exterior and a tuft of some sort on top.

A bomb.

It was his first instinctive thought. But then he reasoned that, even if it were, it must have been standing where it was, waiting to go off, for years.

Keeping as close to the wall as he could, he approached it. When he was almost level he saw, with incredulous astonishment, that it seemed to be a pineapple. Or at least an imitation pineapple, pale orange in colour and with its tuft a hideous plastic green. What - what could it be?

Abruptly he crossed over to it and tugged at the tuft. It lifted to reveal itself as a lid. And inside there was a smooth white bowl-shaped lining. Then he realised what it was. An ice-bucket. Indispensable adjunct for properly sophisticated drinking. A plastic pineapple-shaped ice-bucket. Left here for inconceivable reasons.

He swung round and hurried through the exit.

The escalators were in place and in good condition, their ridged steel treads and aluminium sides glinting in the candle's light. He began to mount.

He was deadly tired. The effort seemed enormous. But tiredness was to be expected after all that he had gone through during this already long day from his five o'clock awakening in the strong moonlight in Mayfair, through the nightmare hunt he had survived in Green Park, his meeting with Marigold, the heart-thudding business of getting across blocked Vauxhall Bridge and then their long, long bowels-of-the-earth tramp.

But there was not much further to go now. Ten minutes. Not that.

And already from above he could see daylight, pale and sluggish but daylight. He paused a moment to blow out Marigold's candle and then took the remaining deep steps of the still escalator, stilled these many years, almost at a run.

Then he was up on top again. The old ticket-hall led straight out into the open and he saw at once that, since they had gone down into the tunnels, it had begun to rain heavily. He slipped through a gap between two of the heavy, long-useless ticket-checking machines, hurried across to the entrance and looked out.

Cloud, dark grey and ragged-bottomed, covered all the sky, and the rain was falling in great plashy drops, filling the gutters of the roadway in front with deep-spreading puddles

and making it hard to see clearly even across the width of the crossroads.

But all the old absolutely familiar buildings were there. They came back to his mind as if it had been only the day before that he had last seen them and not a gap of years. The Grove public house, looking rather like some pleasant suburban residence, neatly and comfortably red-tiled. It might for all the world have been waiting till it was opening time except for its boarded-over windows. No rolling drunk arrack swiggers here. And on the other corner, the bank, Barclays, showing signs still of the time when it must have been attacked, as so many other banks had been at the start of the Second Riots when money had still seemed to be something worth having. And the bookie's shop was still there too, its windows a blank but its sign still visible. How many times had he waited outside there when Jasmine, in one of her betting crazes, had insisted on going in and had pushed across the grilled counter bundles of notes they could ill spare. Wife, wife, bane of my life ...

But soon he would see her, be face to face with her.

Rapidly, scurryingly, he took off the burberry, still with its dangling torn strip where the dog had got its teeth into it, and reversed it so that the rain-proof, or nearly rain-proof, side was outermost. He tugged his way into its reluctant sleeves again fast as he could. He must be off. Almost impossible to tell because of the thickness of the cloud, but it might well be as late in the day as eleven o'clock. Only an hour more then left of odious Tommy's allowance. No, almost certainly a good bit more, since Tommy would have been bound to have left a generous margin so as to avoid any possible wrath.

And perhaps he himself had been pushing on the time a bit. It might even be as early as ten.

But it would be criminal all the same not to hurry over these last few hundred yards. Probably not as much as a

quarter of a mile. Four hundred yards, five hundred at most. How appalling if he arrived only a minute after Jasmine had breathed her last.

He could run. Or could he? Wasn't he too worn-down with fatigue? He could try. Damn it, he could try.

He wheeled abruptly out of the station entrance and into the smacking rain. Bending his head, he trotted. The sole of his right shoe was flapping noisily now and within moments he felt the cold rainwater soaking in. The pavement was vilely slithery, often greened-over. Occasionally one of his feet struck a ridge of tussocky grass. He could hardly see where he was going.

But it didn't matter. It was not far. And he knew the way so well.

Past the little shops on the far side. The name-board of the tandoori take-away was still there, but it was impossible to make out where the Chinese take-away that had used to be a few doors along had been. Past the bus-shelter on this side with the looming poster-site behind it. The trim piece of lawn that had once been there, always immaculately kept, was a thicket of brown willow-herb stalks now and only one of the three huge posters had anything left of it after the weather-beaten years, a picture of a giant gin glass, beaded bubbles winking at its brim.

'Closing Down Sale'. The crudely white-painted words opposite just caught his eye.

The bottoms of his trousers were wringing wet already, flapping coldly against his ankles.

But in a couple of minutes, scarcely more, he would at least be inside and in the dry.

There were blocks of flats beside him, new since he had last come here with Jasmine a few weeks before the parting. New then, beginning to crumble into ruin now. Though there appeared to be a coil of smoke rising laboriously from one of the roofs. Yes, there would be

people here for all that the rain was keeping them under cover. And behind the cracks of window-boarding and through nail-holes in corrugated iron wary eyes would be squinting out at this stranger.

And then, head down though he was, he saw just ahead on the brownish shiny-with-rain pothole-scarred surface of the roadway the patchy alternate black and white stripes of a zebra crossing. At once he swerved, slowed to a walk and crossed to the opposite side.

He might still need luck, Marigold's luck. He was not there yet. Not quite there. And the time, impossible to be sure of it. It might, it just might, be almost midday. He wished he could see another solitary plane. One for luck. But the rain-grey sky put that altogether out of the question.

He pushed himself to a run again.

Half a minute later, as he padded on, aching-legged, past the boarded-over shops, conscious that he was absurdly once more keeping to the pavements, from a turning just ahead – was it the one that led to Mrs Brillings? – there rode ponderously out a man on a bicycle, a heavily mackintoshed figure wearing a sou' wester, looking inflexibly to the front.

He almost shouted out to him before he disappeared into the turning opposite, loud as he could, 'Hello there, is it all right here?' Something like that. Some greeting.

But it would only have scared him.

His run had slowed almost to a walk again, but there was hardly any distance to go. Past a shop he had quite forgotten, a big double-fronted place that had sold motor-boats, power-boats they had called them. There was one still left inside the smashed plate-glass window, a bright jazzy yellow hull.

And now, arriving almost as if it was in a dream where everything was easy and foreordained, there came the

turning.

How many houses along? Can't remember. Never mind. Recognise it at once. Couldn't forget it, ever.

It was just as it had been, too. Except that it all seemed to have got dimmer. The front-door was still that good-taste pale primrose. Only it had faded to an indeterminate cream. But the two long hammered-glass panels in it were intact, and so was the little lantern in the porch with its blobby coloured-stone lights.

He pushed open the flimsy ironwork gate. It squealed appallingly. Mrs Brilling would know he had arrived at last. He darted a glance at the sky.

Yes. Not noon yet. Half-past eleven at the very latest. Probably much earlier. He had made it. With time to spare.

He felt the sweat on his back and sides already beginning to cool. He swallowed to ease the dryness of his mouth. A step into the porch out of the heavy dripping of the rain. A finger to the dinky bell-push with that little black swinging bell engraved on its white plastic.

Bing, bong.

So it was still working. That inflated dulcet sound.

He waited.

Did she still feel obliged not to answer at once, even if she happened to be standing within a yard of the door in that narrow passageway of an entrance hall? It seemed she did.

But, no. She had been upstairs. Upstairs, with Jasmine, watching her draw the last painful breaths. He could hear now through the flimsy door her heavy steps descending. He had heard that sound, too, often enough before, in the once upon a time.

And a sudden chill. A moment of unreasoning fear.

He forced himself to be rational. He was in time.

Mrs Brillling was drawing back the bolts on the other side of the door. Little tiny chromium bolts. He remembered them of old. A good biff would send the pair of them, top and bottom, flying off. But to her they represented security.

And now the latch.

The door creaked back open. Mrs Brillling was standing there. She had changed a good deal. Gone were the ever-pink puffy rouged cheeks he remembered. Instead they sagged in a yellowish face. And gone too the bouncily pneumatic cherished body. She was fatter now, but heavily so. And she wore over an old green dress two thick but threadbare cardigans, one pink and grey-stained, the other baby blue.

He felt sorry for her all at once. She had had a bad time.

'Oh, it's you,' she said.

'Yes. The journey was much worse than I thought, but I'm here.' She looked at him. Piggy little eyes.

'She's dead,' she said. 'She went only an hour or two after I'd phoned you. You could never trust that Tommy.'

He felt the shock as if it were the buffet of some enormous gust of wind. He had to put out a hand to the wall of the little porch to steady himself.

All for nothing. All the miles, the effort, for nothing. All the dangers. For a Jasmine dead before he had even set out.

He looked at Mrs Brillling. Easy to see she hated him.

But it had not been for nothing. No, the journey made in the belief that it had to be made had given him its gifts.

The knowledge now which nothing could take away that survival was possible.

And more precious than that, the knowledge that the rulelessness which seemed to be everywhere in the world now was a force that could be come to terms with, that had to be accepted and welcomed and lived in. That it was a swirling sea that had to be swum in. That swimming against

that everywhere element was the sure way to drown. The knowledge that the world was a mad world but that madness was something to be acknowledged. And shared.

Impossible now, certainly, to say just how that was always to be done. But it was to be done. Perhaps face to face with Jasmine some of the answers would have come, from those gaunt cheeks, those burning eyes. But in due time they would come in other ways. They would come.

‘Well, since you’re here, you’d better come in. Though I don’t know what I shall give you to eat. But come in, come in. There’s a terrible draught when the door’s open.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I will come in. But not for long.’

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